



Zane Grey's **WESTERN**

No.38

WIRE TO WARLOCK

A Complete Novel

By **NORMAN A. FOX**



2/-

TO PAY THE SCORE ●

L. L. FOREMAN

THE PLUNDERER'S SEASON ●

PAUL L. PEIL



Lucas swung around and said hoarsely,
"There's other ways than arguing. . . ."

Wire to Warlock, Chap. 10



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NOVEL (COMPLETE)

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THIS MONTH'S NOVEL
WIRE TO WARLOCK

by NORMAN A. FOX

Pinned against a cliff by a ring of outlaw guns, Holt Brandon's future looks bleak and mighty short. Holt, construction chief for Mountain Telegraph, figures his attackers are after the company pay roll, but their game turns out to be much deeper, and deadlier, than that. Holt's delivery from his plight comes almost miraculously—and his savior wants to bargain! But Holt has one overriding purpose—to get a line through to Warlock, Montana's newest boom camp, in jig time. So he refuses the request of that savior, attractive though raven-haired Ellen Templeton is, not to try to string wire through the valley which is the site of her father's ranch. The success of Mountain Telegraph and his debt to Sam Whitcomb, Mountain's president, mean more to Holt than does his own life. Champ McCoy, bully-boy agent for Mountain's main business rival and Holt's enemy in many a construction battle, shows up in town with Sherm Lucas, head of a gang of rustlers and long riders. Champ makes his brag: it spells Finish Fight. Then Sam Whitcomb arrives on the scene with Gail, his lovely—and spoiled—daughter, and asks Holt to save her from a pending marriage with Kirk Halliday, minority stockholder of Mountain. When Holt moves his crew into the valley, he has to fight opposition from Ellen Templeton's madman father, hit-and-run raids by Lucas's men, pay-roll robbery, and kidnaping—and he has to deal with Gail Whitcomb, which he does violently, in a desperate move to satisfy her father. In an explosive conclusion, Holt comes up with something new in wire-stringing—but he still has an unwilling wife on his hands!

"Wire to Warlock" is a typical Norman Fox Western—which means color and action and unflagging pace: prime meat for Western-story lovers.

A COMPLETE NOVEL BY NORMAN A. FOX

Wire to Warlock



CHAPTER ONE

Ambushed

HERE in the rocks heat dwelt, and danger; and Brandon had both a sharpened awareness of the danger and a sense of unreality. The sun, tilting westward, still got in a steady hammering; and he supposed the heat had turned him light-headed.

He stared at his right hand and felt prideful yet displeased; it had performed much work, but there was all the work yet to be done and no chance at the doing. That was what a man forfeited with his life, the unfinished things.

He grew angrier at the bullets that sang from below, the bullets that dug at sandstone and whined away, making a constant reminder that he

was a boxed-up man with time running out on him.

He had climbed this far, and he could climb no farther. He had a twenty-foot cliff at his back, sheer and unscalable, a closed door to escape. He had cartridges in his belt and the forty-five in his hand; and as long as he could keep an eye on the men below, he'd make certain none spread out to get at him. But when darkness came, those men would rush him.

From where he crouched, he could see the broad sweep of the brush-and-boulder-dotted land below, with the mountains standing yonder, pale and distant and misty blue. Closer, a precise line of telegraph poles marched out of the south.

He looked at the line with affection; here on another range, it was a new job started. Come to reflect on it, all his adult life had been measured out by telegraph poles.

He thought how his own life was linked to others, just as the wire ran from pole to pole. Sam Whitcomb, half a continent away, stood imperiled by the bullets of the besiegers; old Sam would be counting heavily on Holt Brandon to put through one more telegraph line. Jake Fargo, up at the construction camp to the north, would keep waiting for a man who wouldn't return. Likely the crew would say good riddance to a hard taskmaster, but they'd miss Holt Brandon when the going was tough.

A flurry of movement caught his eye as one of the besiegers wormed closer. Brandon let go a shot just to keep them mindful that he still had a stinger. Gunsmoke drifted back and wreathed him.

He squinted at the Montana sun. Getting low—mighty low. He looked again for his horse, lifting himself a little and exposing his head. Yonder, he could see the attackers' horses. His own mount had bolted at the first beat of gunfire that had sent him sprawling to the ground in pretended agony.

That had been two or three hours ago. He'd been heading southward from the camp to Salish town, riding along wrestling with some problem of construction when he'd found himself ambushed; and he'd hit the ground like a man going down to his death. The ruse had gained him the chance to make a bullet-peppered run to these rocks.

Now he wished he'd stayed in the saddle. The fire was hotter than the frying pan. He weighed his chances again and found them mighty slim. Then he heard his name called.

"Brandon! Hey, Brandon!"

Brandon saw a serviceberry bush move, though there was no breeze to stir it; and that heavy, guarded voice said, "Want to parley, Brandon?"

"Who's talking?"

"Sherm Lucas."

Lucas! They'd told Brandon in Salish that Sherm Lucas was the outlaw king of this high country, and the man's name gave Brandon an inkling of why he'd been ambushed.

He called back, "You've cornered poor pickings this time. I've got eight dollars, a sack of makings, and a jack-knife with one busted blade. Is that worth the fuss?"

"Come down here, bucko, and we'll talk about it."

Brandon answered, "You're making a mistake, man. Maybe you figure

I'm packing a pay roll for my crew. But I was heading *south* to Salish, when you tried bushwhacking me. This was just a little jaw-and-grumble trip to our divisional headquarters."

"Doesn't matter," Lucas retorted. "It's *you* we want." His voice rose. "And we'll get you, bucko. You can make it easy for us, or you can make it tough. And when we do get you, we'll remember which way it was."

Brandon's anger rose hotly. When you worked for Mountain Telegraph Company — construction chief, no less—time and again you found yourself bucking Consolidated Telegraph, till you got so you recognized the old, old pattern wherever it showed.

"Come and get me!" Brandon shouted. "But you'll tell your Consolidated bosses you earned your damn' pay!"

"You're calling the tune," Lucas shouted back with a laugh. "We'll do the dancing, bucko!"

Raising his gun, Brandon fired at that serviceberry bush; but even as he fired, he knew that Lucas had already eased away. The outlaw's laughter hung in the air and mocked the gun; other guns spoke, and the rock chipped near Brandon's hand. Bullets ricccheted, singing their thin, whin- ing song.

Brandon bobbed down and fumbled fresh loads into his gun. But with the forty-five ready, he merely held it, his ears strained for any sound that might tell him they were starting a rush.

He waited like this for a long time, and then the twilight was here, gray in the rocks, the sky showing the cop- pery red of the afterglow.

Getting on his knees, Brandon peered over the sheltering rock. Again lead drove a splinter from the sand- stone; below, gunflame made orange splashes in the dusk, but the firing wasn't heavy. Time was working for Lucas now—time, and the descend- ing darkness.

Now Holt Brandon knew that this was no chance attack, no haphazard try at swapping a few bullets for the contents of a dead rider's pockets. Well, he would give them a fight be- fore they got him. Champ McCoy and his Consolidated bunch would have *that* to chew on when the report came in!

In such a mood, he heard the hiss of a rope from above and felt it coil about his shoulders. His wild thought was that an outlaw had got to the cliff top; and he swung around, hoisting his gun for a shot.

A whisper floated down to him. "Tie the rope under your arms." He almost dropped his gun in astonish- ment. That voice belonged to a girl.

This, Brandon judged, was no time for questions. He got the rope tied in place and felt it tugged gently at first, and then he was hoisted off his feet and was being raised. Soon he was clear of the clustering rocks; he was like a spider dangling on the end of a thread, an easy target for those at the foot of the slope if they suspected what was happening.

He blessed the darkness, and, bless- ing it, heard a gun blast. Lead nicked the face of the cliff, and again he felt the sting of a rocky splinter against his cheek. Another gun spoke, and another; a wild shout went up from below.

Brandon flailed his feet against the cliff, trying to get a toehold, trying to help himself upward. Then he was to the rim, and hands were heaving him to safety.

"Easy now," he heard the girl whisper.

He scrambled forward on his hands and knees until he sensed that he was far enough back from the cliff top to be out of gun range. He hauled the entangling rope off himself.

The girl was beside him, and with her was a man. The man was black and over six feet tall, a giant Negro. He wore range garb, this black Samson; and the girl had on a divided riding skirt and a checkered blouse. This much Brandon made out.

The girl tugged at his elbow, saying, "Come on."

Back of the shelf of land at the cliff top, a hillside tilted at a gentle pitch. The three moved on up the slope, coming to the top of the hill and over the hump. Just beyond the crest, Brandon paused, still and attentive. The distant guns had ceased banging.

The girl said, "Over this way! The horses are waiting!"

The stars were beginning to show, and Brandon had his look at her. Her face, though tight with strain, was pretty. Brandon judged that her hair, mostly crowded under a sombrero, was soot-black. About twenty, she was.

She pointed, and astonishment touched Brandon again, for he saw the silhouettes of three horses which stood tied to a forlorn bush on this bald hilltop, and one of them was his own. He was as sure of the piebald as a man could be in this uncertain light.

The girl smiled, showing a flash of white teeth. "We came upon your mount grazing up north. Then we heard the gunfire, and it drew us to the hill. We had to wait for darkness before we could help." Her voice turned more intent. "Sherm Lucas's bunch, I suppose. A hold-up try?"

He nodded, letting her surmise stand. They walked to the waiting mounts. When they were up into saddles, the giant Negro led the way; they put a silent mile behind them, heading northward across a starlighted openness.

Timber loomed up and enfolded them, and they drove deep into the trees, a stand of spruce. Then the black reined to a halt. Brandon and the girl did likewise.

The negro, dismounting, got on his hands and knees and put his ear to the ground. He stood up again, moving with an easy grace for all his bigness.

The girl asked, "Riders close by, Domingo?"

"No, Miss Ellen," the black replied, his voice, soft and gentle as a woman's, as surprising as the rest of him.

Brandon said, "I want you to know I'm mighty grateful to both of you."

The girl measured him with a long look and held silent. Then: "I wonder if you'd be willing to prove that, Mr. Brandon?"

He started. "You know my name?"

"And your work. You're putting a telegraph spur up to the revived boom camp of Warlock. So far you've followed a straight course north out of Salish. But your post-hole diggers have been veering toward the west this last day or so. Does that mean

you've decided to string wire through the Valley of the Three Sisters?"

"Now how the devil could you know that?"

"I've watched your progress through field glasses. So has Domingo. Your change in route was obvious. Now I'm asking you not to enter the valley."

"I hope you've got a good reason," he said.

"My reason wouldn't be important to you. It is to me."

"I'm sorry," Brandon said, "but I've got to go through the Three Sisters."

"I saved your life tonight," she said. "I didn't want to remind you of that."

"You don't have to remind me," Brandon said. "But what I owe you is personal. Mountain Telegraph is another matter. That's my job. I hope you'll have a chance to collect your debt sometime. From me. You can't collect it from Mountain."

She said, "They told me in Salish you were a stubborn man. Now I know they were telling me the truth."

He shrugged. "I'm sorry," he said again. He lifted the reins and touched the piebald lightly with the side of his boot. "So long."

He fumbled at his belt for a forty-five cartridge and raised it to his mouth. He put his teeth to the lead nose of the bullet and bit deep enough to leave a mark. Leaning forward, he handed the bullet to the girl.

"You ever want my help," he said, "send this to me."

She closed her fingers around the cartridge. "Provided my need doesn't interfere with Mountain Telegraph's," she said.

He nodded. "That's right."

Then he was moving away from them. Soon he found his way out of the trees and was alone in the magic of the moonlight. He looked up at the stars and got his bearings; Salish lay somewhere south, and he headed that way. He looked back once, wondering if he would meet her again.

Miss Ellen, the black had called her. It struck Brandon that he didn't even know her full name.

CHAPTER TWO

Disputed Passage

HE MOVED through the darkness like a hunted man, letting the stars guide him and heading always southward, the notion sharp in him that Sherm Lucas and his crew might be about. Hot, they'd be, and hungry for the kill. He rode with part of him standing constant guard and part of him free-minded, his thoughts touching on the job that lay ahead. He could now guess how tough that job was going to be. He'd had his fair sample that afternoon.

Twice on the trail south he heard the rumors of men traveling, the earth drumming faintly to the hard beat of hoofs. And twice he came down from his horse and stood with his hand tight over the piebald's nostrils.

Both times the riders skirted him widely, clattering onward; the second bunch lifted a yell into the night. Cowboys, he decided, homeward-bent after a night of roistering in Salish. But Brandon's caution held till he saw the lights of Salish.

He came into a town that had slept across a dozen years and been surprised at its own awakening. The trading-center for a vast section of mountain and prairie, Salish had suddenly found itself prodded to life by a mining boom at Warlock in the hills above. Now a railroad was building into Salish; a telegraph spur began its march from the town; and all the men who were drawn by the lure of the riches beyond came first to Salish to be outfitted.

High-sided freight wagons rumbled along the narrow street, the drivers sweating and swearing and popping whips, the oxen showing sleepy disregard. The saloons roared ceaselessly, and men crowded the boardwalks.

Through all the street's chaos, Brandon moved unerringly, stepping down from his horse and tying her to the hitchrail before a hastily erected building whose lighted window proclaimed it to be the divisional office of Mountain Telegraph Company, Inc. Brandon shouldered into the single room. Two bracketed lamps laid light upon a long counter with a row of silent telegraph instruments. There was a pigeonhole desk before which a man sat.

"Evening," Brandon said. "You're spelling the night operator, I see. That's learning telegraphy the hard way."

The man, Kirk Halliday, arose as Brandon swung the door shut. A big man, Halliday, the kind who wore broadcloth cut by a tailor and never got a grease spot on his waistcoat. A s'ckey man with stout shoulders and a good chest. He came the width of the room and put his hand across the counter to Brandon.

"What kept you?" Halliday asked.

"A little trouble," Brandon admitted and shaped himself a cigarette. He stood leaning against the counter, a tall man, with the whittled-down hips and flat belly of one much in the saddle. His features were rocky, his gaze direct. "Sherm Lucas," he added. "He and his bunch holed me up for a while."

"Lucas—" Halliday whistled softly. "The outlaw? You mean he attacked you?"

"That was the general idea."

Halliday shook his head and took on the look of one accepting the incredible without trying to understand it. "How are you coming with the line, Brandon?"

"Slow," Brandon admitted and frowned. "But we're just started. Once supplies get moving in fast, we'll really string telegraph wire."

Halliday shook his head. "The deadline's the middle of July, isn't it? Tell me, are you going to complete on time?"

One of the telegraph instruments began clacking, its metallic tongue loud in this little office. Brandon instinctively spelled out the message to himself: C-A-M-P T-E-S-T-I-N-G C-A-M-P T-E-S-T-I-N-G B-R-E-A-K R-E-P-A-I-R-E-D.

Halliday turned to the machine, a Wheatstone automatic, and read the type, then fumbled with a sending instrument and made an awkward acknowledgment. Brandon leaned farther across the counter, propping himself upon one elbow. Seeing Halliday turn again toward him, the question still in the man's eyes, some perverseness arose in Brandon.

"And if we don't complete on time?" he asked. "Will that break your heart Halliday?"

Halliday showed a flush of color. "No, but it will put a hole in my bankroll. I think there was a sneer in your question, Brandon, and I resent it. I happen to be a minority stockholder in Mountain Telegraph; I'm concerned enough over my investment that I've come out here to watch affairs in an unofficial capacity. I'm even learning telegraphy."

Brandon said, "Stay with it, mister. I'll tend to the wire stringing." He wondered at his own rising antagonism.

"Look," Halliday argued, "this Montana job is more important than it appears. You know as well as I that Consolidated is going to get the option on all future work around here if we don't complete on the date specified. That will mean a lot of business in the long run. Montana is a coming place."

Brandon nodded. "Hell, I know that."

"Two years ago the Utah Northern laid the first railroad track into Montana. Now the Northern Pacific is stretching out to the coast. Another few years and there'll be a web of steel in the territory, and that means a web of telegraph lines. It's opportunity, Brandon—big opportunity. This petty little Warlock job is the jump-off to all that will follow."

It struck Brandon that he and Halliday were as opposite as cat and dog. A hint of this had touched him at his first meeting with Halliday some weeks before. He'd listened to Halliday talk then and wondered how a man could see no more in telegraph

building than the swapping of a handful of dollars for a fancy stock certificate. Yet he and Halliday served the same cause in different ways.

Remembering this, Brandon now said, "Maybe I was a mite rough on you. I grant the truth in what you say."

Halliday gave him a quick, searching look. "Stock dividends for me; pay checks and promotions for you, eh?"

Brandon shook his head. There was more to say. "Texas had some rough years after the war. A lot of Texas boys took to the brush and became outlaws. Who's to say where I might have ended if Mountain Telegraph hadn't offered me a job? I'll string their wire on time."

"Meaning—?"

"Meaning I've found a way to outfox Consolidated. After today's doings, I'll be all the more pleased to tangle their twine. You see, they hired Sherm Lucas to dump me out of my saddle."

Annoyance showed on Halliday's face. "That's ridiculous! I know the Consolidated people. They're sharp, shrewd rivals, but they're also men of integrity. They'd never stoop to hiring killers."

Brandon shrugged. *So you know Consolidated?* he thought. *Like hell you do! You've dined with their fancy Eastern officials, but you've never come up against a man like Champ McCoy.* But he only said, "I won't argue with you. You asked a question and here's the answer: I'm going to shorten the miles and shave the days by stringing wire through the Valley of the Three Sisters."

"No!" Halliday said.

Brandon folded his arms upon the counter and leaned forward. "So far I've followed the route laid out by Mountain's surveyors. But I'm wondering if it wasn't surveyed from a hotel window. The map shows a better, shorter way. Through the Three Sisters. I've studied the map and I've done some scouting. I tell you, it can mean the difference between winning and losing."

"You can't do it!" Halliday said flatly. "Oh, I know I haven't the authority to stop you. That belongs to Sam Whitcomb. But think, man! I've studied the map, too. It's obvious that the Three Sisters is the shorter route. But I've checked, investigated. The hills that wall the Three Sisters are Sherm Lucas's hide-out. Through the years he's fanned out from the valley, stopping a stagecoach now and then, raiding a ranch, rustling a few cattle. Did you know that?"

"No," Brandon said. "I didn't. But whatever route we take, we'll have Lucas bucking us."

"You've got your teeth set in the notion that Lucas works for Consolidated," Halliday said. "Can't you see the truth? Lucas is obviously planning to expand his operations and make a killing now that this section is booming. But he's smart enough to realize that wires strung through the hills will make a web to warn posses and trap him. That's why he'll bedevil us a dozen times as much if we work into the valley."

Suddenly Brandon was tired of this. "Is that all, Halliday?"

"One more thing. There's some sort of eccentric who lives in that valley. He ran Mountain's surveyors

out with rifle bullets pelting around their heels. That's why they made their survey by the longer route. I got that straight from the head office. If you tackle the Three Sisters you'll be asking for trouble. From more sources than one."

Brandon started for the door, but at the threshold he paused. "Jump on the wire, Halliday, and get Chicago headquarters," he said. "Tell them I've gone crazy and am set to ruin Mountain Telegraph. Tell 'em I'm stringing wire through the Valley of the Three Sisters."

"You can do your own talking," Halliday said. "Sam Whitcomb's here."

"No! In Salish?"

"A few miles from here. He came to the end of the track in his private car. I was to tell you that he wants to see you. His daughter's with him."

"Gail!" Brandon said wonderingly. "She was a child the last time I saw her. That was a long time ago. Let's see, she'll be all of twenty years old now."

"And a handful for any man to handle," Halliday said.

Brandon nodded. "I'm obliged for the message. I'll ride out. Tell Jake Fargo, if he wires from camp and wants to know what's keeping me. He's straw-bossing the crew."

He strode from the office and crossed the board walk to where he'd left his horse. Jerking at the tie-rope, he swung into the saddle. But before he could back the piebald from the rack, a man came striding along the walk—a lean, black-garbed youngster who carried a doctor's case.

"Hello," the fellow said. "How are things out at your camp?"

Brandon remembered him then. Doc King. Dr. Jonathan King. He'd met the medico before, when he had first come to Salish to start stringing wire from the town.

Brandon said on impulse, "I'm glad I ran into you. They say you're a good doctor."

"Best in Salish. The only one, for that matter."

"What keeps a good man here, Doc?"

King smiled. "There's some nice-smelling mountain air in the locality," he said. "Walk outside town and get beyond the whisky stink and have yourself a sniff. Then you'll understand."

Brandon shook his head. "I think there's more reason than that."

"Yes, there is," King admitted and turned grave. "I like this country, Brandon. A real town's going to grow out of this boom, and I'd sort of like to grow up with it."

Hell, Brandon thought, everybody's dealing in futures tonight.

"Want to talk to you," he said. "Mountain Telegraph would like to retain you. That means you'll be down on the pay roll and expected to check in at the divisional office here once a day. If a doctor is needed out at camp, you'll hop a horse and come fast."

King smiled. "You expecting an epidemic?"

"Yeah," Brandon said. "Of gunshot wounds." He crooked a leg around the saddlehorn. "Tell me something, Doc, what's this about a crazy man who lives in the Valley of the Three Sisters and shoots at anybody who comes calling?"

King's eyes turned guarded. "I could tell you a great deal about him," he said. "But the person happens to be both my friend and my patient. What's your interest in the Three Sisters?"

"I'm going to string wire to Warlock by way of the valley. It's shorter."

King shook his head. "I don't suppose my asking you not to would budge you any."

"No," Brandon said. "It wouldn't. You're the third person tonight who's either asked me or told me to stay out of the Three Sisters. I'd like to oblige you, Doc. But I've got a job to do."

King was less friendly now. "I'll not waste my time arguing with a man whose jaw is as square as yours," he said. "I only hope you'll reconsider before you enter the valley."

He nodded and moved along the boardwalk and was soon lost in the slow-moving river of men. Brandon watched him go. Then, shrugging, Brandon dropped his foot to the stirrup.

Next thing was to get out to end-of-track and see Sam Whitcomb and his girl. A mighty late hour to be calling, but Sam had owl blood in him.

Brandon rode between the two rows of false-fronts. Abreast of one of the saloons, he heard his name called.

"Hey, Brandon! Hold up!"

He turned in his saddle and saw the big, square-faced man who stood at the head of the steps beneath the wooden overhang. He knew that set of shoulders, did Brandon, and that hearty voice; and he brought his horse about slowly and jogged her slowly until he could look into the eyes of

Champ McCoy, construction chief of Consolidated Telegraph.

"Well, Champ," he asked, "what's chewing at you?"

CHAPTER THREE

Hard Man

A FIGHTING man, this Champ McCoy. A bare knuckled, kick-'em-in-the-crotch and bite-'em-in-the-clinches fighting man, with all of an avalanche's impact in his big frame. He stood there in the garb of his trade—pantaloon tucked into boots, plaid shirt, rumpled corduroy jumper—with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and his smile like a campfire.

He said, "Brandon, it's good to these eyes you are."

"Sure," Brandon said. "You're as happy to see me as you'd be to find a cactus in your pocket."

"Ah!" McCoy sighed deeply. "After Colorado and Wyoming and all those places, I'd thought you'd call it a grand night when you heard me shout. Sure and we've worked different sides of the fence, but we're wire stringers, the pair of us. Good ones. The best in the business. Are you so hard a man that you deny the same warm spot in your heart for me that I've got for you?"

Brandon brought his horse closer, so close that her fetlocks struck against the bottom step leading to the saloon's porch. The piebald turned her head and regarded him mildly. Brandon saw now the saloon's sign above McCoy: *The Hogshead*.

Brandon had got close enough to smell the whisky on McCoy and see the red network of veins in his broad face. He said, "Get at it, Champ. What's really chewing at you? What fetched you here?"

"Why, I've come to pick up the pieces," McCoy said, still smiling.

"You're a little early then, mister. Quite a few weeks too early."

"I've got time to spare," McCoy said. "And I'll enjoy watching Mountain Telegraph bust itself up."

"You've been waiting for that show a mighty long time, Champ."

"Situations change, my friend," McCoy said. "And money is the sinews of war." He teetered on his toes and rocked forward. "The talk is going around that bad investments have put Sam Whitcomb's back to the wall. Haven't you heard? You'll fail on this job, and Consolidated will take over the wire stringing in Montana. You and me will be on the same side of the fence then."

"How do you figure?"

"Why, I'll be offering you a job," McCoy said. "As my own right-hand assistant. I could use a man like you, Brandon, and be glad to have you."

"A job," Brandon said slowly. "So you'll have a job for me."

"The same as you'd have for me, if it was the other way around," McCoy said. "Isn't it a fact? Come inside and we'll have a drink on it."

A man laughed then; and with the laugh, Holt Brandon got a full awareness of the man. He had come from the saloon and ranged himself at McCoy's shoulder, looking dwarfed beside McCoy, for the fellow was slight of build. The face was handsome in a wild sort of way and dark enough to

hint of Mexican or Indian blood in the family. The laugh had an edge to it like a knife blade.

The man said, "A drink, eh? Let *me* be the one to buy, Champ."

Brandon looked him over. "We've met before, I think," he said, but he wasn't sure.

The slight one said, "You look familiar, too." He brought the makings from his pocket, fashioned a cigarette, and lifted his eyes to Brandon. "Swap the makings for a light."

Brandon took a match from the band of his sombrero and extended it.

"Thanks, bucko," the slight one said and struck the match and cupped it close.

That one word *bucko* did it. When you squat in a nest of rocks and shout at another and he shouts back, you hear a different voice from the one he uses in ordinary talking. But a man gets to throwing certain words into his talk, and they stick out whether his voice is high or low. Just one had turned the trick. Brandon lifted his gun from leather and leaned forward, bringing the barrel down hard across the crown of Sherm Lucas's sombrero.

Lucas would have tumbled down the porch steps but for McCoy's catching him. McCoy eased Lucas down to the porch's planking. Lucas's sombrero fell off, and a thatch of black hair showed.

McCoy put his fingers in Lucas's hair and said in a harsh voice, "His scalp isn't broken, but he'll have a bump the size of a pine cone. Now what the hell made you do a thing like that?"

Brandon still held the gun. "He gave me a bad afternoon."

McCoy was on one knee on the porch. "They say I'm hard," he said. "But I never want to be as hard a man as you, Brandon. I laugh when I fight, and I fight for the fun of it."

Brandon said, "Then you'd better tell your men to do likewise. This one probably rode in to get his pay. When he comes awake, give him another five dollars. He's earned it."

He dumped his gun and neck-reined the piebald around and headed along the street. He rode into a prairie night with the stars a remote glitter and the breeze soft to his cheek.

Out here somewhere a railroad spur was reaching across the openness toward Salish whence it would push on to distant Warlock. The telegraph line was up, and Brandon had only to walk his horse beside the poles to be sure he headed in the right direction. This part of the line had been put up by the railroad; Mountain's contract called for a start from Salish northward.

Soon he came upon the camp of the bridge and culvert gang, which worked ten to twenty miles ahead of the graders and track layers who pushed the railroad across the prairies. The construction shanty was night-wrapped, the gang asleep, but an old man kept vigil at a fire. He wore the faded blouse of a Union soldier with the chevrons of a sergeant still sewed upon the sleeve.

Brandon rode into the rim of the firelight. "How far to end-of-track?" he asked.

"No more than seven miles," the

old one said. After a first quick appraisal of Brandon, he showed a petulant boredom. "Those graders work as though Ireland's fate depended on it. One of these days they'll catch up with us at an unspanned draw and have to lean on their shovels till we get a bridge finished."

"You keep this fire going all night?"

"We've got tools scattered around, and a lot of light-fingered drifters have come in with the boom, they tell us." He shivered. "For June, it can get mighty damned cold in this country before morning. You wouldn't be packing some of the hair of tonight's dog?"

Brandon fumbled at the lashings that held his slicker behind his saddle and got them untied. From the slicker he unwrapped a pint of whisky. He thought of Jake Fargo, straw-bossing up at the telegraph camp, for he'd fetched this whisky from camp lest it fall into Jake's eager hands. He held it out.

"Glory hallelujah!" the old one said. He took a deep pull at the bottle and extended it back to Brandon.

"Keep it," Brandon said. "Cut down on those swigs and time them right, and the bottle will last you till morning."

"Why, thankee," the man said. "It's this old coat did it, I'll bet you. Third Ohio. You wore one once, eh? You'd have been old enough for a drummer boy, I guess. What regiment?"

"Hell," Brandon said, "I'm from Texas."

"For a fact? Well, Rebel whisky's as good as any."

"Better than most," Brandon said and rode on.

Another hour and he came upon the scooped-up welt of the grade, with stacks of piled ties beside it and dumped steel glinting in the starlight. Soon he passed a siding where a boarding train lay, the brightness of the night touching the windows of these bunk cars where men slept. Somewhere along here would be Sam Whitcomb's private car, shunted out of the way and left standing.

He saw a car that was lighted and judged it to be the one he sought. He rode toward the car and stepped down from his saddle and let the reins drop to hold the piebald. He set his fist against the door leading into the vestibule of the car and banged hard.

"Sam!" he called. "Sam, you old son of a gun! Open up!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Raiders at Railhead

WHITCOMB'S voice, made woolly and remote by the thickness of the door, came to him: "Who is it?"

"Holt, Sam. Holt Brandon."

The door opened, and Whitcomb said, "Come in, son. Don't stand there growing roots."

"Sure, Sam," Brandon said and climbed up the steps. He felt Whitcomb's hand find his and tighten on it; he felt Whitcomb's other hand squeeze his shoulder. Whitcomb opened another door and urged Brandon toward it, and Brandon stepped into the quiet world of glittering

chandeliers, mahogany and red plush that was the private car.

"Halliday got word to you, eh?" Whitcomb asked.

Brandon nodded. "You're looking fit, Sam."

Sam Whitcomb had always reminded him of a longhorn, lean and rangy and quick to move. He had the sharp nose of a Yankee, but his mouth was generous and his eyes were warm. He had a grin for Brandon now.

"Some brandy?"

"A couple of fingers," Brandon said and dropped unbidden into one of the plush chairs and thrust out his boots. Whitcomb poured out liquor generously and passed some to Brandon.

"Mud in your eye," Whitcomb said.

Brandon took the drink down fast and neat. He remembered that Whitcomb's daughter was supposed to be here. One end of the car was partitioned off; beyond the door, he supposed, were sleeping-quarters, and Gail was probably inside. Funny that he'd nearly forgotten that Sam had a daughter.

"How's the job, Holt?"

"Moving along. We've climbed out of the flat country. By the way, Champ McCoy's in Salish blowing a big wind in the saloons."

Whitcomb showed annoyance. "Hard on our heels, eh?"

"To pick up the pieces, he says." Brandon grinned. "We really flat busted and ready to be cut into the culls?"

Worry crowded into Whitcomb's face and etched the lines deeper. "You

might as well know it, Holt. We've got our backs to the wall."

This surprised Brandon; he had put McCoy's talk down as no more than that—just talk. He swept a hand to take in the elegance of the car. "This doesn't look like a poor man's hang-out. Sam."

Whitcomb smiled. "Show yourself heavy-pocketed, and the world thinks you've got all the money cornered and your credit is sound. Truth is, we've been going on credit for a good many months."

Brandon shook his head. "I thought I was watching Mountain grow bigger, job by job."

"I know," Whitcomb said. He began pacing. "I started Mountain Telegraph with a ten-dollar bill and a second-hand transit. After each job, I set aside money for the operating costs of the next job, then invested the surplus. Good investments meant that we piled up money fast and were able to buy better equipment, pay higher wages, outbid our rivals time and again. Do you follow me?"

Brandon nodded.

"Lately I've played the market wrong, Holt. We're in a split stick, son. This Montana job could get us out, for it will mean a lot more jobs. All the world backs a winner. But the loser gets kicked hard."

Brandon shook his head again. To him, telegraph building meant the stringing of wire across rough country; and these financial matters were a little beyond his full understanding. You put your faith in a man like Whitcomb, and you went ahead on that faith.

Now Brandon opened and closed his fist. "We go through the Three

Sisters," he said. "No choice left."

Whitcomb ceased his pacing and stared.

"A short cut," Brandon said. "Halliday's against it."

"I remember the reports," Whitcomb said. "The surveyors had trouble. Are you sure you're making a wise move, Holt?"

"Anything is better than having Mountain Telegraph go belly up," Brandon said, and he recalled Champ McCoy's smile.

Then he saw Gail. The door from the sleeping-compartment had opened soundlessly, and she stood in the doorway. She had drawn a wrapper over her nightgown; her hair lay long and golden on her shoulders, and her eyes looked sleepy. He was not prepared for the woman she had become. She had turned full-bodied and sultry.

"I heard you talking," she said.

Whitcomb said, "You remember Holt, don't you, Gail?"

She came forward and put out her hand to Brandon. He struggled to his feet and took her hand and found it firm and friendly. Her eyes laughed at him.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Dad's Texas wild man. I have heard a great deal about you, Mr. Brandon. You seem always to supply chapter and verse when my father wishes to preach me a sermon about my shortcomings. I admit they are many. But I'd prefer to be compared to someone a little less rugged."

"Abigail!" Whitcomb exploded.

Brandon said, "I've heard Sam read the riot act to a few. They always deserved it."

Her eyes laughed again, this time

at herself. "*Touche!*" she said. "That's French, Mr. Brandon."

"We don't use it on the job."

"Do you do a good job?"

"The best I can."

"Then perhaps you'll do one for me. I've grown tired of bumping over this rickety roadbed and seeing a dozen shanty towns that all look the same. I'd hoped there'd be excitement on this trip. I'll count on you to provide it."

Brandon said, "We lead a dull life. and a hard one. You'll find that out at the construction camp, if you care to come and see for yourself. Just keep from underfoot while you're there."

She looked at her father. "Is he always this insolent?"

Whitcomb said very quietly, "Go back to bed, Gail. We've got business to discuss."

"Of course," she said and turned meekly and headed for the sleeping-quarters. At the door she looked back and smiled, showing her meekness to have been a pose.

"Good night, Mr. Brandon," she said and winked at him as she closed the door behind her.

Sam Whitcomb spread his hands. "I apologize for her, Holt."

Brandon said, "I hope she stays clear of the construction camp. This is no tea party we're going to be staging."

Whitcomb shook his head. "I'd have left her at home if I'd had spine enough to buck her. All I ask is that you remember that she's never known the kind of life we've known." He looked worried. "No, it's not that simple. I've got to ask even more."

"That I keep her from finding it dull out here?"

"No," Whitcomb said. "That you keep her from kicking over the traces. There's a man."

"Yes," Brandon said thoughtfully. "There would be."

"Kirk Halliday, as a matter of fact."

"Him? He could damn' near be her father!"

"Maybe that's part of what attracts her. They were engaged a year. Kirk thought that having a hackamore on her meant she was as good as bridled. That's where he made his mistake. But she knows he's out here, and I think that was half the reason she chose to come along. She's wilful, Holt. But there's a lot of good in the girl. Help me keep a hold on her."

Brandon made a fist out of his hand and stared at it. He said, trying to pick up the broken thread of their talk, "About that route through the Valley of the Three Sisters—"

Whitcomb nodded. "I'll trust your judgment on that, Holt. Yet I can't forget the surveyors' reports. More brandy?"

Brandon shook his head. "Not tonight."

Then Brandon came to his feet, startled. A boot had kicked hard at the door leading in from the vestibule, and his single thought was that Whitcomb must have forgotten to lock the outer door after admitting him.

Two men lurched into the car, one crowding behind the other. Two bandanna-masked men with slickers drawn over their outer clothes. Guns were in their hands, and that was

what kept Brandon from trying for his own weapon—that and the certainty of whom he was pitted against. Nothing could hide that set of shoulders or the blocky bigness of the man in the lead, and Brandon knew that second, slighter figure, too. He hadn't put Sherm Lucas to sleep for long.

He said, "What the hell is this, Champ?"

McCoy's voice came muffled through the bandanna. "Sure, and you'll find out. Just get your hands up and put your face to the wall, Brandon. You, too, Whitcomb."

Whitcomb looked at Brandon and asked, "Champ McCoy?"

"Gone crazy!" Brandon said.

"Like a fox," McCoy chuckled deep in his throat. He moved his gun. "Do as you're told!"

In the hush on the heels of McCoy's words, the smashing of glass filled the car with sound.

One of the windows had blossomed a jagged star; and Brandon's wild notion was that Sherm Lucas had let go with a random, intimidating shot. But common sense blew a cool breath on his thinking, and he knew at once that this pair would not want any unnecessary fireworks that would rouse the boarding-train and bring the workers spilling from their bunks.

And then he understood.

Another star blossomed on the glass. This time Brandon heard a rifle bark far out in the night. Someone in the yonder darkness was taking a hand in this.

Brandon leaped sideways and fell into a crouch. McCoy had turned and was bolting, almost bowling over

Lucas in his haste. At once the two of them were in the vestibule and, from the sound they made, crowding through the outer door.

Brandon got his gun out and charged toward the vestibule. He got into it and found the outer door open and leaped to the slope of the grade.

Along the row of cars two hunched figures ran. Distantly, Brandon made out the silhouettes of horses.

He let go with a shot and knew as he fired that he'd missed. He saw McCoy and Lucas swing up into saddles and lift their horses to a gallop. He ran to his own waiting piebald and caught up the reins.

The boarding-train was a roar with excitement, and the first of the workmen were already spilling out. They got between Brandon and the two fleeing horsemen, and he did not fire again. He looked out across the starlit prairie whence those rifle shots had come. No moon now, but he saw another horseman dimly. This one bulked immense in his saddle and lifted a rifle in a flourish as he rode off.

"Domingo!" Brandon called. "Domingo, come back here!" but the giant black paid no heed.

He pulled himself to the back of his mount. Whitcomb was on the steps of his private car; his voice lifted above the excited shouts of the half-dressed workmen who swarmed along the grade.

"Wait, Holt!" Whitcomb cried. "Where you going?"

"To the camp," Brandon shouted. "Better post a guard the rest of the night. I don't think our friends will be back, though. They've got a bellyful. But they've showed how bold Consolidated has turned."

"Sleep here tonight," Whitcomb urged.

Brandon shook his head. "I want to be nearer the camp when the sun comes up. There's wire to be strung."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Crazy One

HE GOT no farther than Salish on his return ride; there tiredness became a club that drove him from his saddle. He hit town between midnight and morning.

He put the piebald in the wagon yard behind Mountain's divisional office where wagons and piled supplies stood gauntly outlined; and he walked wearily to the Ballard House, the hotel where Halliday stayed. A drowsy desk clerk took his signature and gave him a key, and he climbed to the room and let himself in.

The bed had a swaybacked look, and he hoped it was not too rampagous with livestock. He got out of his boots and hung his gunbelt over a post of the bed, blew out the lamp and crawled under the blankets.

Sleep did not come at once. He had bedded under the stars so many nights, or within the canvas of a Mountain Telegraph tent, that walls seemed to push at him and the ceiling was like the lid of a coffin.

That girl, Gail. She arose in the darkness behind his closed eyelids and was a soft, full-bodied creature, so exciting that he put away the thought, finding in it some disloyalty to Sam Whitcomb. Damned if the girl hadn't rubbed his fur the wrong

way with her spoiled-brat airs and her crosswise notion that Holt Brandon was supposed to make the West woolly for her!

He wondered now, as he'd wondered in the car and on the return ride to Salish, what had moved McCoy and Sherm Lucas to their desperate act. Maybe Lucas had wanted revenge and had followed Brandon to even up. But Champ McCoy would have backed no such loco notion. Had they been going to kill old Sam and so leave Mountain Telegraph leaderless?

No answers rose out of the hotel room's darkness, so Brandon turned over and willed himself to sleep. He awoke in the grayness of dawn, and while Salish still slumbered he dressed and came down to the street.

Brandon rattled the locked screen on a Chinese restaurant and so became the first customer of the day. Twenty minutes later he rode out toward the north.

String wire, and you follow a routine in which each day is like the one before, except for the shifts of weather and the particular problems of that day. Even the problems form a repeated pattern of annoyance; trouble shows a dozen familiar faces.

So it was with Holt Brandon that week after Salish. Each day was full from dawn to dusk and even beyond the darkness, when huge brush fires lighted the scene for overtime workers. Kept a man humping just to boss all the crew.

With his crew divided into three sections, the vanguard bunch dug

post holes; the second group cut poles and set them; the third strung wire. There was even a man to follow up, trimming off any tree branches that touched the wire. Brandon sweated with them and was everywhere at once.

Sam Whitcomb was in Salish now, holding forth at divisional headquarters by day and returning to his private car each night. Sam was one who could understand that when a construction chief bellowed for insulators, he wanted insulators. And Halliday was there, too, running errands for the big boss and otherwise making himself useful. But what of McCoy and Lucas? Brandon wondered.

No cut wires these days. No pelting rifle bullets; nothing but the constant and ordinary troubles that came with crossing such terrain.

Yet Brandon kept guards posted, though when you robbed a man of sleep you did not get his full effort the next day. Once the day's shift was done, it was bed down fast, boys, if you aren't working an overtime shift. Morning's coming soon.

This was Brandon's way of conducting a camp; it had always been his way when a race was on. He was a remote spirit, apart from his men; he was the constant spur, urging them on. He had their respect, but he owned little of their affection. This he read in their eyes when he gave them a bit of his tongue.

Some he knew from away back, for a few were veterans even older than he in the service of Sam Whitcomb. Jake Fargo, for instance, whiskey and given to fighting the bottle on pay-days. He had worked with Whitcomb

on Western Union and could tell you how they'd scared respect for the white man's magic into those two Indian chiefs, Washakie and Win-nemucca, by having them talk over the telegraph wire and then bringing them by Overland stage to a juncture point halfway across the five hundred miles that had separated them. A surprised pair of redskins they'd been, Jake reported, when they compared what they'd talked about and realized how fast the long lightning had carried their words.

Well, there were no troublesome Indians in Montana to buck Mountain Telegraph. A good country, Brandon decided as he sat his saddle and looked upon it. A country where he could cut down the construction hours. Trees ready at hand to provide poles.

He set his eyes on the three distant hills that gave the valley its name and remembered that Warlock lay high on the hill that stood farthest to the west. He measured the distance with his eye and counted the days that were left and got a tight feeling in his belly.

Kirk Halliday came riding up from Salish in an open buggy the next morning. He raised a hand in salute. "I've had a long talk with Sam Whitcomb, Brandon. He's approved your change of route. He said your judgment has never failed him yet. He knows your record better than I do. Maybe I was hasty the other night."

As green an olive branch as a man could offer him, Brandon admitted in his mind. "Supplies have been coming through steady," he said. "That's Salish's doing. Likely you've had a

hand in seeing that everything runs smooth down there. I'm grateful, mister. I'll be wiring my thanks from Warlock in a few weeks."

Halliday scanned the sweep of valley to the northward. "Any trouble with the eccentric who ran our surveyors out of here?"

"The crazy one? Not a sign of him."

"Good," Halliday grunted and was soon on his way southward again.

The next day an advance post-hole digger's yell fetched Brandon on the bound. Topping a slight rise to the west was a tall, stately rider, lean of face, with a carefully trimmed silvery beard. He wore the full regalia of a Confederate colonel of cavalry, complete to the saber.

The post-hole digger spat a stream of tobacco juice. "Now what the hell! Is this Confederate Memorial Day?"

"Take another look, friend," Brandon advised. "You've only seen half the show."

A second rider had bobbed over the rise to range alongside the first. This second man was the giant Negro. Domingo wore range garb, but he now held himself with military stiffness.

The two came forward, the black keeping at the heels of the colonel's horse. When they were near enough, the soldier raised a gauntleted hand in courteous salute.

"Who's in charge heah?"

"I am," Brandon said, and identified himself by name. Boxed T brand on both horses, he noticed.

"I, sir," said the soldier, "am Colonel Templeton. Alan Templeton. At present attached to General Longstreet's command, as is my companion, Captain Israel Domingo, a

freeman. I perceive that you're constructing a telegraph line. For whom, may I ask?"

Some whispered warning deep in his mind gave Brandon an inkling of what the proper answer should be and so forged the lie for him. "Our superiors are located in New Orleans," he said.

"*New Orleans!* New Orleans, sir, is in Yankee hands! General Butler holds the city and Farragut's fleet hammers at Vicksburg." He turned quickly to the silent Domingo. "You've deployed our troops properly, Captain? We have this camp completely surrounded?"

Domingo said solemnly, "Your orders have been carried out, suh," a note of sadness in his voice.

That smothered the laughter that had begun building in Brandon. This, then, was the eccentric holding forth in the Valley of the Three Sisters, who had kept Mountain Telegraph's surveyors out, forcing them to choose a longer route to Warlock.

The man was mad—so mad that for him time stood still. Nearly two decades after the peace of Appomattox, the war that belonged to the yesterdays remained an actuality to Colonel Alan Templeton.

What was it Doc King had said in Salish when Brandon had asked about the eccentric of the Three Sisters? "*I could tell you a great deal about him. But the person happens to be both my friend and my patient.*"

And the girl—the one called Miss Ellen, who had come with this same Israel Domingo to save a trapped Mountain Telegraph man and to ask that man not to enter the Valley of

the Three Sisters? Holt Brandon could see her face in Alan Templeton's, and another riddle was solved. He could understand why she hadn't wanted to explain the madness of her father.

Now a man stood before him who opposed the telegraph line, and you had to subdue this man with a different weapon from one you'd use against another. You could draw your gun on a Champ McCoy but not against an Alan Templeton.

"I'm a Texan myself, sir," Brandon said. "And I give you a Confederate's word of honor that this telegraph is a private enterprise, having nothing to do with the war."

"A Texan? Then why aren't you in uniform? You appear able-bodied. And no enterprise can be considered as having nothing to do with the war as long as there is a war. I perceive that you and your men are not properly armed for combat, and the fact that I came here under a sort of truce stays my hand. I shall return within the week. If I find you and your men still here, I'll have no choice but to order a charge."

"Now, look—!" Brandon began.

"Good day, sir!" Templeton said emphatically.

Behind Templeton, Domingo shook his great head, his eyes sad, his thick lips forming soundless words. In his face was a plea for tolerance and understanding. Brandon now knew in what coin he was supposed to pay his debt to this giant black, and he nodded slightly.

Templeton saluted stiffly and neck-reined his horse around, and the two went clattering up the rise.

CHAPTER SIX

Heart of Night

WHEN the supper fire had burned low that evening, Brandon called Jake Fargo to his tent. Fargo, tall and stringy, bobbed through the canvas flap and found a seat in the midst of Brandon's gear. The tent held telegraph instruments and was the outer station from which messages were flashed back to Salish. Brandon had been testing to make sure there was no break in the line. He kept fiddling with the key until the job was completed.

"Well, Jake," he asked, "what did you think of the old warrior this afternoon?"

Fargo grunted. "The man means business, Holt. But I reckon he's got more bark than bite. His cavalry troop is all in his head, of course, but even a couple of men with rifles could give us trouble. You figuring to change the route back out of the valley, Holt?"

Brandon shook his head. "The thing that worries me is how big a force Templeton has and whether they'd back him in any real play to keep us out. His crew can't be crazy, too, and so willing to fight the old war. But if he convinced them that we're trespassers, they might be willing to trouble us."

"What do you figure to do, then?"

"He's got a ranch farther up the valley somewhere. At least he's got a brand, and he must hole-up someplace. I'm going to scout his layout tonight. If I get held up, I want you to keep the crew pushing hard tomorrow."

Fargo asked, "You riding out soon?"

"Soon as I get saddled. Good night, Jake."

But Fargo didn't move. A worry of his own showed plainly on his whiskered face.

"What is it, man?" Brandon asked impatiently.

"Payday was yesterday," Fargo said.

"I know," Brandon's lips drew tight. "As a matter of fact, Salish reminded me over the wire and was all set to send out the money. I told Sam Whitcomb to hold it in town. There'll be a big payoff at Warlock when the line is finished."

Fargo frowned. "Nothing said about that when the crew signed up."

Brandon turned a hard face toward him. "I'll have no man heading for town for a night of carousing till the line's finished. And since they can't spend money out here, the company might as well be holding it for them. What's the matter with you, Jake? A big thirst crowding you?"

"It can keep till Warlock," Fargo said. "The boys are muttering, though. You're making a mistake, Holt."

"My worry," Brandon said.

Fargo said with an old man's temerity and bluntness, "You're a good man, Holt. But Mountain Telegraph ain't the whole, complete, and total life of all of us. Was I you, I'd get that pay roll up here."

Brandon said, "You handle your own job, Jake, and I'll handle mine."

Fargo shook his head. "Somewhere along your trail, something changed

you from a man to a machine. I'd hate to be lonely as you—or so damn' certain sure of myself."

Brandon arose. "I'll try to be back before sunup. If I'm late, I'll expect to see poles standing where there aren't any now."

Ten minutes later he rode out of camp. He headed almost directly northwest, driving deeper into the valley, and soon the moon showed and the land lay bright all around. Brighter than he liked, considering that he was on a sneaky mission and didn't want to be seen coming by any guards that Colonel Templeton might have posted.

He let the piebald gallop awhile, and then he pulled her down to a walk. The country was growing a bit rougher, with coulees making long blue lakes of shadows here and there, and more timber showing, wind-twisted junipers mostly, looking as if they had the agonies. He guessed he had put the camp quite a far piece behind; the stars told him that midnight was past. He rode on through the heart of night.

Then the land dropped away before him, and at the foot of the slope the buildings of a ranch sprawled.

To his left he saw a small clump of junipers, and he headed his mount that way and felt easier when he got among the trees. From here he could still see the ranch.

The main house was long and low and made of logs. The barn was big, and the corrals were many. Several outbuildings—these would be blacksmith shop and wagon shed, and a granary, perhaps. The bunkhouse was long and low and built of logs. Look-

ed like it could hold from a dozen to twenty men.

This had to be Boxed T. From this direction Templeton had come, and to this part of the valley he'd returned. No light showed in any of the buildings below. Brandon dismounted and hunkered upon his heels.

He squatted for a long time, studying the ranch and debating whether to go closer. Nothing to be gained by that—he'd wanted to judge the size of the crew, and the bunkhouse had given him a good notion of Boxed T's strength.

His thighs began to ache, and he stood up. He walked forward to the very edge of where the land began dropping away. He stood still in the moonlight and let his eyes rove wide.

Then an electric shock touched his spine. No more than a quarter of a mile away, a light showed.

Someone with a lantern stood farther along the rim, to the west. Whoever was there swung the lantern back and forth as a signal.

At once Brandon melted back into a juniper clump. He thought he detected movement below. Somebody moving down there, leading a horse. Walker and mount got far enough from the buildings to be seen more plainly; the person below rose to saddle. Brandon lifted his eyes and swung his head. The lantern no longer showed.

Brandon looked up at the moon. It moved in the heavens; it moved toward a cloud wrack. He waited; finally the great shadow fell. Brandon moved again from the junipers, leaving the mare behind. He headed toward where that lantern had swung.

He watched the sky, and when the moon appeared again, he flung himself into a clump of chokecherry bushes near the rim.

He had to wait longer this time for shadow, and he couldn't risk looking to see where that horseman rode. Then he heard the jingle of a bit chain, the creak of saddle leather; and he risked raising himself.

A horse humped over the rise perhaps fifty feet from him. The moon showed itself again; in the light, he saw Ellen Templeton and another who had come along the rim leading a horse. That second prowler of the night was Sherm Lucas.

Lucas spoke harshly: "I thought you'd never show up!"

Ellen's voice was remote and toneless. "I saw your first signal an hour ago. I couldn't make up my mind to meet you. When you used the lantern again, I slipped out."

Lucas said impatiently, "I rode away and then decided to give you a second chance. I suppose you haven't made up your mind."

She said, "I've thought about it. God knows, I've thought about it. But I can't do it, Sherm."

"So you'd rather stay with him," Lucas said. "You'd rather waste your life away. You'll look at yourself every morning and you'll be one day older and not one minute happier. Is that your choice, Ellen?"

"He's an old man, Sherm. He's a sick man."

"That big black can take care of him better than you can. Why the devil didn't you wrap that iron box in a slicker and bring it along? We

could have ridden away tonight."

"You wouldn't have wanted what you'd have got, Sherm. Not half a girl, with the other half somewhere on the back trail."

He came closer and drew her down until he could kiss her. His voice changed suddenly—too suddenly—to a soft, pleading tone.

"Ellen, how long do you think I can go on waiting?" His voice dropped too low for Brandon to hear, but Ellen's words came clearly:

"Give me more time, Sherm. Just a little more time."

Lucas stepped back from her, and his voice turned harsh again. "I can come and take that box anytime I want to run the risk," he said. "You know that. I can crack it open and fill my pockets and ride off. But that's only half of what I'm after. You'd better have your answer ready the next time I swing the lantern."

She said, "Sherm, do you think waiting is easy? It's not that I don't want to come to you. It's only that I can't come free-minded."

"The world is full of girls," he said flatly. He moved away and climbed aboard his horse and reined it around.

She cried out, "Sherm—I!" and he turned and looked at her. But she didn't speak again. Lucas studied her for a long moment, then rode away.

She brought her horse around and headed toward the rim, and Brandon rose from the bushes.

"Hold up," he called.

She turned in her saddle; her free hand fell and rose, and he saw the glint of moonlight on a drawn gun.

He said quickly, "It's me—Bran-

don!" He took three strides forward with his hands half raised.

"Oh!" she said, the single word a long sigh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wagon Aflame

BRANDON made a cigarette, wanting something for his hands to do. He listened hard and heard the distant beat of hoofs that told him Lucas rode far out and away.

Ellen looked down from her saddle and said, "I can guess what you must think of me."

He drew on the cigarette. "Next time he waves that lantern, why don't you try putting it out with a rifle shot?"

"He's not to blame. I've been willing enough."

He made a small gesture with his hands. "Look, you don't have to talk about this."

"There's never been anyone to listen before," she said. "I first met him months ago, when I was riding one day in the hills. He finally told me who he was. By then I guess it didn't matter. Some night soon I suppose I'll come and ride away with him."

Brandon looked at the glowing end of his cigarette. "Has he ever mentioned a preacher?"

"No," she said. "He hasn't." Her steadfastness broke then. "I'm twenty-four. For nineteen years I've mothered my own father through his queer sickness, and for eleven years I've run our ranch. I have never been to a

dance or a party, and no man has ever kissed me but Sherm Lucas. I've lived alone and marked my birthdays alone and slept alone. I've not quibbled with what Sherm has so far offered me."

He lifted his eyes to her. She had been often sad, this one, crying out for someone to recognize that she was woman and ready for awakening. But a man didn't trade on a woman's need, and his anger blazed against Lucas.

"He mentioned an iron box," Brandon said. "What's that got to do with it?"

"It's one my father brought from Kentucky," she said. "He kept it at the bank in Salish for a while. Then he got the queer delusion that the Federals were going to invade Salish, so he moved the box to the ranch. The whole range buzzed with talk about that. Sherm Lucas heard the talk."

"Strikes me that he wants the box more than he wants you."

"I suppose," she said. "You see how little pride I have left."

"Are you afraid he'll raid the ranch for the box if you don't fetch it to him?"

"He will if it comes to that. He's a stubborn man, and a wild one, I've hoped for a better bargain from him, that's all. There's that preacher you mentioned."

He wanted to reach out to her, to say that he understood loneliness and all the needs that had to be denied. But he had no words that would not somehow hold a sting, so he said, to cover his awkwardness, "We had visitors today. Your father came to my camp with Domingo."

"Yes," she said. "I know. But you're still not turning back, are you?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry for him."

She said, "He's got a special reason for hating telegraph wire. Do you remember the storming of Fort Loudon near Knoxville in 1863? General Longstreet ordered the assault, and the men stumbled into telegraph wire strung between stumps. That threw the front ranks into disorder, with Federal canon sweeping them. It was there that my father's head was creased by the rifle ball that took his memory. I've heard him fight that telegraph wire many times in his sleep."

"You brought him here to Montana?"

She nodded. "When I was thirteen years old, I talked him into the move. You see, I had to grow up quickly. We sold everything we owned in Kentucky. We got a few cattle here—native stock—and built up the ranch with the help of a small crew. I thought that peaceful surroundings might work a cure. They haven't."

"Mighty big bunkhouse for a small crew."

"We hoped to grow," she said. "But we've only five men. Six, counting Domingo. He's a West Indian black, a manumitted slave who worked for our family in Kentucky. He was with my father in the army. So were two of the others who are now in our crew. The rest we hired here in Montana. I don't think I need to tell you how loyal a cowboy can be, Mr. Brandon."

"But would they attack my camp because of a notion of your father's?"

"They were ready to back him up when he ran your company's surveyors out of the valley months ago. Today my father was very grim when he returned from your camp and reported what he'd learned. If he asks the crew to run you out, I think they'll try. After all, Boxed T is private property. Had you thought of that?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I had. Normally Mountain would buy right of way. But how could the company have dickered with a man like your father?"

"I know. And if the crew brings a fight to you, I suppose they'll be outlawed. Does that mean nothing to you?"

He took a moment for thinking before he spoke. "You know young Doc King from Salish?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "He's been treating Dad for the last year or so. Sometimes he thinks he can bring about a cure. But I wonder if he only says that to keep me hoping."

"King is a good man, and I'll bet he's doing his best," Brandon said. "But the point I'm getting at is this: Doc King argues that the railroad and the telegraph will make this country a lot more livable. He's got an eye on tomorrow. There must be a lot of others who think the same. Are such folks to go on living in a wilderness just to suit the fancy of one old man whose clock stopped nearly twenty years back?"

"I've never looked at it that way," she admitted. "I've spent nearly all my life taking care of him, and that's become habit. Maybe I'm selfish, but his comfort and happiness is my job, and nothing is more important to me."

That's why I didn't ride away with Sherm tonight."

"Did Lucas know it was you who broke up his play when he had me penned in the rocks?"

She shook her head. "He wouldn't forgive me for that."

"Then I'm that much deeper in debt to you," he said. "Did you tell Domingo to follow me that night?"

"It was his own idea, but I didn't stop him. You'll find that any move Domingo makes is always somehow concerned with Colonel Templeton's well-being."

He looked up at the stars and read the time by them. "I'll have to hump to make it back to camp by sunrise," he said. He glanced toward the juni-pers. "My horse is over yonder."

She lifted her reins. "I've told you more about myself than I've told any other person, I wonder why."

"I don't know," he said. "I hope I've helped you."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "You really do hope that, don't you? You're a strange mixture, Mr. Brandon. I wish that Mountain Telegraph wasn't always first with you."

He said, "My name is Holt. Good night, Ellen."

"Good night, Holt." She turned her horse about. "Till we meet again."

He watched her go down the slope. He wished her well, and turned to the juni-pers where the piebald waited.

He rode into his camp in the darkness before dawn and was challenged by his own sentry before he was allowed to pass. He groped his way to the tent that Fargo shared with three

others; he would tell Jake to take over at day-break. But Fargo was not in his blankets.

Brandon felt around till he was sure of this, and his angry thought was *He's gone to Salish, damn him!* Fargo's claim to hobbling his great thirst till they reached Warlock had been so much talk.

He didn't wake the others; they needed their sleep. He found his way to his own tent, and as soon as he'd bobbed through the flap he heard deep snoring. He found a lantern and got it alight and saw Jake Fargo sprawled out upon the blankets. Beside Fargo's outflung hand lay an empty whisky bottle.

Brandon knelt by Fargo and got hold of the man's shoulders and shook him hard. Fargo mumbled wild words and batted aimlessly at Brandon's arm. Fargo opened his eyes and blinked in the lantern light.

"Where did you get it?" Brandon demanded.

"Go 'way," Fargo said and tried to roll over.

"Where did you get it?" Brandon insisted. "The only bottle I had here I took with me nearly two weeks ago."

"Eh? The bottle? Halliday."

"Halliday brought you whisky?"

"Fine man, Halliday. Returning favor. Helped him learn how to telegraph. Brought me whole quart. Yesterday. No, day 'fore yesterday."

Brandon remembered that he'd been up ahead with the post-hole diggers when Halliday had first driven his buggy into camp. That must have been when Halliday had passed over the bottle to Jake.

Brandon turned to the telegraph key and jiggled it fiercely, trying to

raise Salish. No response there. But divisional headquarters might well be deserted at this useless hour, the night operator busy at something else or gone to bed.

Brandon reached for Fargo and shook him again. "Get to your own tent, Jake."

Fargo protested in a jumble of words but at last crawled toward the flap. "You're making a mish—mistake, Holt. Can't treat men like they wash on Injun list and get work out of 'em."

"Get out of here!"

Brandon got his boots off and his belt laid aside and crawled into the rumpled blankets where Fargo had lain. He let his rage grow white against Halliday, and then slumber overtook him.

He was moving about in the first gray of morning. Another day had begun. He got the post-hole diggers strung out and the rest of the crew at their duties, returned to his tent, and opened the line to Salish. He raised divisional headquarters and got Sam Whitcomb at the other end.

Brandon tapped quickly: T-E-L-L H-A-L-L-I-D-A-Y I-F H-E B-R-I-N-G-S M-O-R-E W-H-I-S-K-Y T-O C-A-M-P I W-I-L-L B-R-E-A-K T-H-E B-O-T-T-L-E O-V-E-R H-I-S H-E-A-D.

Whitcomb's reply came at once. K-N-O-W N-O-T H-I-N-G A-B-O-U-T T-H-I-S B-U-T W-I-L-L C-H-E-C-K.

Within half an hour the set began clattering, and Brandon spelled out the message. Halliday himself was wiring; Brandon recognized the unpracticed hand. I-N-D-E-B-T-E-D T-O F-A-R-G-O F-O-R F-A-V-O-R

D-I-D N-O-T K-N-O-W M-A-N I-S B-O-T-T-L-E F-I-G-H-T-E-R W-H-I-T-C-O-M-B H-A-S E-X-P-L-A-I-N-E-D E-X-T-R-E-M-E-L-Y S-O-R-R-Y.

Brandon shook his head and went back to supervise his crew. Fargo showed from his tent at noon, hard-used and ugly and not quite able to meet Brandon's eye.

"There's just one thing that needs to be got straight, Holt. Halliday didn't know I'd burn up that whole quart in one night. If you've got to give somebody hell, give it to me."

"Get to work, Jake," Brandon said bluntly.

Fargo said, "Just a minute, Holt," and even his whiskers looked truculent. "I had that quart night before last, remember. But I didn't tap it. Half of what made me finally open it was defiance. You've held back the pay roll because you don't trust any of us to stay on the job if our pockets are jingling. When you put it to a man that he can't have something, he's likely to try to show you that he bigawd can!"

Brandon kept a tight hold on his temper. "There's a lot I could say to you, Jake, that I'm not saying. Don't needle me any more than you already have. Now get to work."

He walked away from Fargo, not wanting his temper to grow beyond holding. He saw poles go up that afternoon and found a sour satisfaction in the progress made. He got Whitcomb on the wire again and asked about more men, and Sam promised to see what he could do. Sam had a question, too. Had Gail been along with Halliday the other day?

Brandon wired him no. Whitcomb admitted worry. The girl had been seeing a lot of Halliday of late.

Brandon returned to his crew. Sam Whitcomb could damn well do all the worrying about his wilful daughter.

He pushed the crew till supper-time and ate morosely with them. He debated about a night shift and decided against it. He named three men to sentinel duty, and while the crew still squatted around the fire, he crawled into his tent. He was lying soaked in sleep when the staccato barking of guns dragged him alive.

He came hurrying out of the tent and saw that the teamster's wagon was afire. Only coal oil, liberally sloshed, could make a blaze as bright as that.

Jake Fargo stumbled past him, shouting orders at the crew. Fargo saw him and said from the corner of his mouth, "They snuck close enough to set the wagon ablaze. Now they're out there throwing lead to keep us from fighting the fire."

Brandon saw them then, a half dozen or more riders who were circling the camp Indian-fashion, firing steadily. In the first starlight he saw them and recognized the biggest one. Sherm Lucas and his crew had struck, and with them was Champ McCoy. This was McCoy's method, old and familiar.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Long Shadow

CLOSE by Brandon a gun began a steady hammering, and he saw one of the post-hole diggers down on his knee, working a Winchester.

"Aim before you shoot!" Fargo shouted, but the post-hole digger showed a stunned face in the wash of the firelight.

Brandon stood spraddle-legged, his gun in his hand and the sweat of excitement cold on his skin. Around him the camp had become chaos, the rope-corralled horses rearing and pitching, men scurrying every which direction, and that wagon blazing brightly. He tried a shot at the biggest raider, the one he believed to be Champ McCoy.

Not too big a force attacking. Brandon judged that only seven or eight circled the camp. His own force was greater, but his crew stood exposed in the firelight.

Brandon shouted, "Wheel up the water barrels! Get that fire out!"

The teamster had been filling barrels at the nearest creek each day, and the barrels stood here and there about the camp. Brandon ran to one and began tussling with it. Several of the crew had flung themselves behind a barricade of piled telegraph poles. A man left this protection to lend Brandon a hand, and they worked the barrel toward the blazing wagon. Brandon found a bucket and began sloshing the wagon.

A bullet clanged against the bucket he held, the impact stinging his hands. He discarded the bucket as useless, but he and his helper had now lowered the contents of the barrel by half.

"Give it a heave," Brandon ordered.

They lifted the barrel and tossed the water at the flames, moving so close to the wagon that Brandon felt the heat against his face and wondered if he

still had eyebrows. Others were wheeling up water barrels; they spilled one over in their haste. But the wagon was soon being drenched from all sides. In another ten minutes the blaze was out. The raiders rode their endless circle.

Again Brandon looked about him. Here and there guns winked close by, telling him where his own men were stationed. And from the outer darkness guns replied. Brandon marked a gunflash, and fired at the emptiness where he hoped the man might be.

And then, suddenly, the fight was over.

The raiders, turning tail, were scattering to the four winds, their defiant jeers drifting back. Some of the Mountain crew threw gear onto horses, and three or four riders went roaring out of camp. As well chase the wind, Brandon thought, but he let them go.

Near where Brandon stood, someone groaned. Brandon saw a huddled shape in the darkness.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Me—Pete," one of the wire stringers said. His voice was sharp with pain. "I got nicked."

"Bad?"

"In the arm. No bones broke."

"Spit tobacco juice on the wound and wrap it with your bandanna," Brandon advised. "We'll get you fixed up soon."

He went striding toward his tent and groped for the telegraph key and at once raised the night operator at Salish. Brandon's message was short: C-A-M-P S-H-O-T U-P S-O-M-E W-O-U-N-D-E-D F-I-N-D D-O-C K-I-N-G A-N-D S-E-N-D H-I-M F-A-S-T.

He got his acknowledgment and left the tent. He saw his crew, a close knot of men in the starlight.

He asked, "How about Pete?"

"I've got a bandage on him," the cook said.

"Anybody else hurt?"

"Two others. They'll make out all right."

"Do the best you can with them," Brandon said. "I've got Doc King coming."

Now there was nothing to do but wait, and time became a rasp on his nerves. He looked about for Fargo and found that he had been one of those who'd given the raiders a chase. He named another man to sentry duty and so had two posted to the north of camp, two to the south.

He inspected the wounded and found them in fair shape, though one was showing fever. Brandon let a small fire be lighted; sleeplessness held the camp, and the men sat morosely before their tents.

Sam Whitcomb, aroused by the night operator at Salish, wired for details of the attack, and Brandon gave them. After that, Brandon tried getting some sleep.

Near morning he was brought alert by hearing one of the sentries raise his voice in challenge. Brandon groped out of the tent. Doc King rode into camp on a lathered horse.

"So now I start earning my pay," King said.

Brandon took him to the wounded and watched while King worked. Before King had finished with his second patient, the murk of early morning was in the camp.

Brandon came out into the openness and cupped his hands to his

mouth. "Dawn's here, boys!" he shouted. "Roll out!"

They spilled from the tents and had their breakfast and got to their appointed tasks. The teamster looked at his burned wagon and shook his head, but Brandon said, "It's got wheels under it, mister. And the tongue didn't burn. Get at it."

The teamster turned a surly face Brandon's way. "So it's fight half the night and then work all day with a wagon that's ready to bust in the middle! And to top it off, we wait till you're good and ready to give us our pay!"

Brandon said, "Your pay's safe," and strode away. Half an hour later, he was approached by Doc King and the two of them went to Brandon's tent.

King looked tired, but the joy of work performed showed on him. "That fellow Pete will be back on the job in a couple of days," he reported. "The man with the hurt shoulder will get along all right, too. But the fever case is going to need watching. You'd better send him to Salish for a while."

Brandon made a fist. Champ McCoy had tallied last night. When you had your crew worn raw by a night like last night, and some not able to work, you had Warlock shoved just that much farther away.

He looked at King. "I appreciate your getting up here so fast, Doc."

King said, "I know the country pretty well. I have a lot of night calls."

Brandon's mind shunted to the night before last. "Some that take you as far as Boxed T?"

Worry shadowed King's young face. "You're into the Three Sisters

now. I suppose that means you've met the colonel."

Brandon said, "Boxed T needs more than a doctor. It needs a man to take over. But you know that already. Your face gives you away, Doc. I think more than the colonel interests you up there."

King shook his head. "All I mean to her is the hope that someday her father may be cured."

"Ah," Brandon said.

"There's a man who sometimes swings a lantern at night, Brandon." King's face stiffened. "She comes to meet him when he does. I saw them the first time by the merest happenstance; I confess to having spied on them since. What is it about worthless men that makes them so attractive to women?"

"I haven't got the answer to that one, Doc."

King said, "Every man to his own troubles. I don't know why I burden you with mine."

Brandon had to grin. "Because you've got to speak to somebody or bust. You've kept this locked up inside you too long."

King looked at his hands. "Physician, heal thyself, eh?"

"Something of the sort," Brandon said. "You set a great store by the future. Why not think of your own tomorrows?"

King said, "I mean nothing to her but a hope for her father."

Outside, a shout was raised, and it brought Brandon from the tent on the bound. Fargo had ridden in with the three others who'd gone with him.

"They're far gone," Fargo said. "It was Champ McCoy, all right. I got close enough to be sure of that." He

swung down from the saddle, making an awkward dismount; pain showed on his face.

"You're hurt," Brandon said.

"I likewise got close enough to get singed," Fargo admitted. "A flesh wound in my shoulder."

"More work for you, Doc," Brandon said to King, who had followed him from the tent. Brandon looked at the others who had ridden with Fargo. "If you fellows have whole hides, go have the cook rustle you something to eat. Then there's work waiting yonder."

They helped Fargo into Brandon's tent and seated him on the blankets. King went to work on him at once. Fargo winced as King swabbed an ugly gash across his shoulder.

"You still holding up the pay roll, Holt?" he asked.

Brandon said wearily, "Haven't any of you got anything on your minds but that?"

Fargo said, "I'm going to have to tell you, Holt. It's been whispered around that Mountain overstretched its credit and can't pay. A little money spread around this camp would make a lie out of it. *Ouch!* Doc, can you go a little easier?"

Brandon said, "I thought you were a tough one. You'd think this was the first wound you ever had."

"The fifth for Mountain Telegraph," Fargo said. "How about that pay roll, Holt?"

Brandon turned to the telegraph key. Something else had proved stronger than his own stubbornness, something that lay in Jake Fargo's screwed-tight face as King worked at the wound, something that had come out of a night of danger shared once

more with his crew. The message ran: S-E-N-D P-A-Y R-O-L-L A-T O-N-C-E.

Whitcomb was at the other end and replied promptly: H-A-L-L-I-D-A-Y O-N R-O-A-D N-O-W W-I-T-H P-A-Y R-O-L-L M-E-A-N-T T-O S-E-N-D M-O-N-E-Y Y-E-S-T-E-R-D-A-Y P-E-R Y-O-U-R R-E-Q-U-E-S-T O-F N-I-G-H-T B-E-F-O-R-E S-O-R-R-Y A-B-O-U-T D-E-L-A-Y.

Brandon stared at Fargo. "Did you get that?"

"Hell, I could read Morse before you could, Holt."

Brandon said hotly, "Why, you damn' drunken—"

Fargo held up a hand. "Whoa, Holt. I told you I couldn't remember all I said and did that night. Some where in the middle of that bottle, I must have come across the notion that it would be a good idea to put your name at the end of a message. Where's the harm, since you want the pay roll anyway?"

Brandon laughed in spite of himself. "It must have been the night operator who got your message. Sam would have known it was you and guessed you were drunk."

King looked up from his work in surprise. "How's that?"

"A man's touch on the key is as recognizable as his voice," Brandon explained. "Whitcomb knows my touch, and he knows Jake's." There was a core of worry for him in this moment, and he at once touched it. "Halliday—" he mused. "I wish Sam could have found somebody else for the delivery job."

Fargo's eyes brightened with interest. "You're thinking of McCoy's

outfit heading south, with Halliday coming up from that direction? Is that it? Soon as this man gets finished with me, I'll ride down and meet Halliday."

Brandon said, "About all you'll be good for the next couple of days is to sit on a rock and yell orders at the crew. I'll ride south myself." He glanced at King. "Will you be coming, Doc?"

King said, "Later. I want to look in on that fever case again."

Brandon went out and saddled the piebald. Halliday might indeed drive right into the arms of Lucas and McCoy and those other raiders of last night. Brandon cut due south, keeping the telegraph line in view.

Thus he came out of the valley and onto the plain that lifted gently upward from Salish to the folding hills that hemmed the valley. The camp a few miles behind him, he came upon a wagon road that ran north out of Salish before it bent westward, and he followed the road, knowing that Halliday would come over it.

He veered away from the telegraph line and so found himself in a primitive expanse where the land rose and fell and small, rocky hills hid the horizons. Near here he had been ambushed by Lucas and hoisted to safety by Ellen and Domingo. Noon came and passed, and he supposed he had covered about a third of the distance to town. Shortly he saw Halliday's buggy.

It stood empty, nearly motionless, just off the road; the horse had fallen to cropping. Spurring closer, Brandon felt as though he'd been kicked in the belly. He dismounted and tied the piebald behind the buggy and climbed

to the seat. He picked up the reins and wheeled the buggy around and sent it south along the road at a fast clip.

Within the next mile, he found Halliday. The man was seated on a rock beside the road, his head in his hands, his shoulders bowed. He lifted a startled face as Brandon rode up and said, "Thank God!"

Brandon said, "Lucas and McCoy, eh?"

Halliday nodded. "McCoy's the only one I knew by sight. There were seven or eight of them."

"They got the pay roll, of course."

"And Gail."

"Gail—!"

"She insisted on coming along. They took her with them." He pointed to the west where far hills lifted. "They rode off in that direction."

Brandon looked toward the hills. He remembered that night in Sam Whitcomb's private car when Lucas and McCoy had entered masked and armed. Now he knew. Lucas and McCoy had been given a second chance and had seized it. This time they had succeeded in kidnaping Gail and so put Sam Whitcomb at their mercy.

CHAPTER NINE

Voodoo

FIRST there had been fear, and now danger came. Brandon leaped out and walked to the rear of the buggy, untied the piebald, and stepped up to saddle. He looked at the shapeless hulk of Halliday and judged that the man had been no more than shaken up. He couldn't keep from asking:

"You still believe Consolidated wouldn't stoop to rough play?"

"Do you have to rub that in, Brandon? I've had a bad enough time this last hour."

"No bones broken, I'd judge. Do you think you can climb into the buggy?"

Halliday came to an unsteady stand, pushed back his hair with the heels of his hands, and stepped toward the buggy.

"I can manage," he said. "One of them clouted me hard when I put up a fight."

Brandon looked across the land. "You're a little nearer the camp than you are to Salish. Take the buggy on north. You'll probably meet Doc King on the road. But get Whitcomb on the wire and tell him what's happened. I'd cut in from the line, but I didn't fetch climbers or any equipment."

Halliday asked, "Where are you going?"

"After her, of course."

Halliday's face turned hard. "Give me your horse and gun. You take the buggy. Man, she's engaged to me!"

"That was awhile back."

"No, we've become engaged again."

This was news to Brandon. He said bluntly, "It isn't going to matter who gets the medal. Don't you see why they've taken her? It's a way of putting Sam Whitcomb over a barrel. They'll force him to meet their terms, which will probably mean forfeiting the Warlock job if he wants her safe, or else they'll expect him to take the whole crew and go stampeding through the hills. Either way, they win. On top of that, they've picked up a

pay roll that's needed. I've got to cut their sign while it's fresh. It's not your kind of job, mister."

Halliday climbed to the seat. "You're right, Brandon; it's too important a matter to be trusted to a greenhorn. I'll get on to camp." Something crossed his face. "You don't think they'll harm her?"

"She's too valuable for that," Brandon said, but he wasn't sure.

Halliday said, "Good luck, Brandon."

Brandon neck-reined his mount around and lifted his hand in farewell. "You tell Jake Fargo to keep the crew at work. They don't have to stand around waiting to see how this turns out."

Halliday nodded. "I'll tell him."

Brandon faced west. A nice chunk of country to comb, he thought ruefully. But all you had to do was put yourself in Champ McCoy's boots. A place to hole-up was what McCoy would be hunting. A place where a man could sit on a stump and chuckle at the thought of Mountain's crew spending its strength and its time in wild skallyhooting. A place from which terms could be sent to Sam Whitcomb. And Sherm Lucas, an old hand hereabouts, would know such a place.

Far ahead, Brandon thought he could make out the raised dust of passage. He rode at a high gallop for a way, held the piebald down to a walk or a trot, galloped again.

Soon the afternoon was nearly spent. In the shadow of the hills, Brandon found a creek. The land had turned rockier and coulee-riven, and sometimes the trail of Lucas and his

men faded out. Brandon began following the creek. Lucas would want to camp by water, and thus the creek might lead him to Lucas, though that was a gamble.

The trail climbed through barren slopes to the first pine and became then a faint spoor made by wandering game. The trail clung close to the creek and moved upward in long loops and short ones, these switchbacks climbing, always climbing.

Presently Brandon came into a mountain meadow and in the last of the light looked for sign. Bent grass and the fresh droppings of a horse told him that riders had passed this way not very long before.

He paused here long enough to build up a smoke. He listened sharply and thought he heard the crashing of horses along a timbered trail, but the sound was both remote and hard to place. He pushed on across the meadow. There was always the chance that Lucas had set someone to trailing, behind.

He rode into timber again and followed another game trail upward until he came upon a promontory that gave him a look at the country below. He could see a last glint of sun on the distant telegraph line and wondered what messages sped back and forth between the camp and Salish. He felt sorry for Sam Whitcomb, knowing how the news would hit Sam.

The darkness came like a lamp blown out. He moved on, letting the piebald pick her way; he listened always for the racket of the creek. Starlight came; the moon showed.

Presently he came into another of those mountain meadows and here he debated, then stepped down from his

saddle. No sense in groping blindly along. He left the piebald saddled but loosened the cinch; he led the mare to the creek and let her drink. He scooped up a mouthful for himself and splashed water over his face.

The chill drove at him and he wondered about risking a fire. He bundled up some pine boughs and laid them at the edge of the meadow, but still he was uncertain.

A voice said, "Safe to light it, suh."

Brandon leaped sideways and he got his gun into his hand. In the midst of drawing, recognition of that voice came to him. He peered hard, found a giant form, and said with relief, "Ah, Domingo!"

The great body crouched, and a match sprang to life. Domingo, squatting on his heels, fanned the tiny blaze with his sombrero. He stood up; smiling, he faded backward and presently returned, leading his horse. Brandon saw that a Winchester rode in a saddle scabbard. From his gear, Domingo produced a coffeepot and a frying pan and went silently about putting these to use.

"Here," Domingo said when the time came and passed bacon and coffee to Brandon.

Brandon put the food away fast and stretched himself out by the fire. He made up a cigarette and looked at Domingo, who showed a black, placid face.

"How long were you behind me?"

"I've been riding the hills, suh," Domingo said. "Watched a slew of riders from a point. Pretty soon I

saw you. Since dark I've been hunting you."

"You know these hills well?"

Domingo nodded. "Better than most."

"Could you lead me to Lucas and his outfit?"

Domingo shrugged. "Reckon."

Brandon said, "There's a girl with them. Packed away against her will."

Again Domingo nodded. "Only two of us," he said at last. "Quite a slew of them. You want that kind of fight?"

"The sooner the better," Brandon said and remembered Halliday's fear.

Domingo arose, and Brandon, too, would have come to his feet, thinking they were leaving, but Domingo motioned him to remain seated. The giant black moved to his horse. He returned with something in his hand. Seating himself cross-legged before the fire, he closed his eyes and at once his body became tense. Brandon saw that he held a shapeless piece of black wax in his hand.

Domingo spoke to himself in a low mumble; the Negro's transfixed look made Brandon's skin prickle. Domingo began to twitch and shake. He kneaded the wax, and Brandon saw the stuff take the crude shape of a human figure.

Now Domingo fumbled at his boot top and drew from it a bowie knife. With this he pricked his forearm until a drop of blood stood out, bright in the firelight. Pressing the wax figure against his arm, Domingo then laid the figure near the edge of the fire.

Brandon watched fascinated as the wax began to melt. Soon it was only a shapelessness again. Domingo ceased

his rocking and crooning and opened his eyes.

"What the hell is this?" Brandon demanded hoarsely.

"Voodoo," Domingo said. "My mother was a *cunjer*. Sometimes I got the power. Sometimes not. Maybe I take away a man's strength tonight. Lucas's."

Brandon shook his head. This giant Negro was something so utterly primitive as to be beyond naming. But Domingo smiled and was thus transformed to a friendly child in the firelight.

Within a few minutes they had the fire out and were riding the night, Domingo leading the way. In another mountain meadow where the starlight reached and there was room to ride two abreast, Brandon pulled up beside Domingo.

"There's something I've got to know," Brandon said. "Come tomorrow, what do I owe you for tonight?"

Domingo shrugged. "Yo' make your own answer to that, white man."

"I'm putting a telegraph line through the Three Sisters," Brandon reminded him.

"Tonight we hate the same man, so we fight him together."

Brandon caught the undercurrent of anger in Domingo's voice, and he thought, *He knows about that swung lantern and how she goes to meet him.* He said, "Just one more thing. I can understand why you hate anyone who might give the old man trouble, or the girl. But why would you fight a crazy man's war for him?"

Domingo said softly, "You mean shooting at the surveyors?"

"That and whatever's to come. Why risk trouble just because of a notion of his?"

Domingo said very solemnly, "He made me captain, suh."

"In the war? Ellen told me you were with him."

"That was General Lee's army, not Colonel Templeton's. The colonel doin' his own generalin' now. He's the whole Confederacy. And he made me captain. You heard him say it: Captain Israel Domingo."

"I see," Brandon said. There was nothing more to say. He, too, had long known that for each debt there must be a repayment, and that for each man there was a different measuring stick to gauge how the payment should be made.

The trail was invisible to Brandon, but Domingo moved unerringly; sometimes, when they were again into timber, he warned Brandon in a soft voice of low branches or unexpected turns. After a while Brandon thought he saw a light wink in the distance, but it vanished. Then he saw the light again; once more it vanished.

They had been climbing for nearly an hour; they had moved away from the creek, but Brandon again heard its muttering and judged that they had cut across an elbow of land. Soon Domingo held up a warning hand and drew rein. Before them stood a cabin, its open door showing a yellow rectangle of light.

"There," Domingo said.

Brandon made out the faint shape of horses in a corral beside the cabin. A mingling of voices came to him.

He asked, "What is this place?"

"Hashknife line shack. They a

ranch on the west slope. Ain't no roof but this for a long ways."

"I'm going in," Brandon said and stepped down.

Saddle leather made its small complaint as Domingo dismounted, too. He stood silently by Brandon; he looked across the clearing to the cabin. He said then, "Only four horses."

Brandon, peering hard, accepted Domingo's judgment. Four horses. There should be more mounts than that. Halliday had reported seven or eight in the crew that had taken the pay roll and Gail away from him.

Brandon wondered if those voices belonged to Hashknife cowhands spending a night at the line shack. Then he heard Gail. A fragment of talk came to him above the clatter of the creek, and he was sure.

He said, "They've sent the others to Salish to get a message to Sam Whitcomb. He's the girl's father. All the better for us. Come morning, there'd be twice the outfit to go up against."

"Good *cunjer*," Domingo said, and his teeth flashed.

CHAPTER TEN

Pursuit and Disaster

BRANDON had marked a second fall of light from the cabin and so knew that a window stood in the west wall, around the corner from the door. "I'll take the door," he said. "You get to the window and cover me. Don't make a play unless you need to. This is my party."

He felt Domingo move away from him; and he drifted, too, cruising

across the clearing in such a way as to avoid the fall of light from the open doorway. He was alert for a posted guard, but none challenged him. They must have made allowance for how long it would take Halliday to reach either the camp or town and organize pursuit. Yet he held to alertness.

He reached the doorway and stood just beyond the path of light. Leaning slightly, he got a partial glimpse of the single room. He could see one end of a table at which Champ McCoy sat, his broad back to the door. On that table stood a black leather bag which Brandon at once recognized, for it had carried the pay on a score of jobs.

On a bench along the wall, Gail Whitcomb crouched; she wore a tailored riding-outfit, and her hair had come loose so that it tumbled long and golden on her shoulders. Anger and defiance showed on her. Sherm Lucas sat beside her, his dark face petulant.

Lucas reached now and put his hand on Gail's arm. She drew away from him. Lucas smiled sourly. McCoy laughed.

"You're just plain poison to her, Sherm," he said. "Sooner or later all you lady killers run up against one who wants no part of you."

Lucas flung McCoy a forced smile. "She's so used to Eastern broadcloth, Champ, she don't know what a real man's like." He reached again for Gail and was rough about it; he pulled her around so that she faced him. "Isn't it so, honey?"

She showed real fear then, but anger was still in her. She got at Lucas's shin with the toe of her boot, a hard kick. His face twisted with pain, and he let her go. At once she

was on her feet and darting toward the door, but Lucas moved as fast. He got his arms around her waist and pulled her back and swung her around.

He said hoarsely, "There's other ways than arguing with them, Champ."

McCoy said, "None of that, Sherm. The deal didn't include rough stuff. We've still got a dicker to make with Sam Whitcomb, remember."

"Hell, who's to know? She's not going to tell it far and wide afterward."

Brandon chose then to step through the doorway, his gun in his hand. Whatever showed on his face made Lucas release Gail. Brandon saw that the cabin held a bunk and a stove; beside the stove sat two men who were turned motionless as statues by his entrance. McCoy swung around in his chair and let out a huge roar. Gail ran to Brandon's side.

Brandon said in a voice he failed to recognize as his own, "I ought to blast the living hell out of every one of you!"

McCoy recovered first. "Brandon, boy, it's a start you've given us. Alone?"

"Of course not," Brandon said and found that he was shaking with anger. He looked at Lucas. "Go ahead and try for that gun you're wearing."

Lucas shook his head. "Another day, bucko."

Brandon spoke to Gail without moving his eyes from Lucas. "Cross behind me and pick up that valise. Good! Is it full? Now fade out. You'll find horses at the edge of the clearing. Climb onto the piebald."

She had got the valise and come behind him again; he felt her move away from him. "Captain," he called. "Come in here and lift their guns. I'm taking the crowd into Salish."

Only McCoy remained unruffled. Sitting sideways on his chair, he said cajolingly, "Now, Brandon, be a sensible man." Then, suddenly, McCoy upset the chair by leaning his weight against the back of it, and he dived for Brandon's legs as he went down.

Brandon, leaping aside, felt McCoy's weight strike him. He also saw Lucas's hands fall; he knew that Lucas was seizing all the worth there might be in this moment. The two by the stove stirred to life, but sound filled the cabin, and darkness, as the lantern blotted out. Domingo had fired through the window.

In the darkness, gunflame sprang at Brandon. That was Lucas shooting. Brandon fired three times, shooting blindly and moving his gun so that it raked the room. In each gunflash he caught movement, vague and meaningless. Something heavy crashed across the table, and a man screamed.

Brandon slammed through the open door. He ran half-way across the clearing, then turned and fired at the dark blob of the doorway. He heard Gail call, "Over here!" her voice clear and high-pitched. Something gigantic shaped up in the night; Brandon tilted his gun, then recognized Domingo.

Brandon ran on and got to the piebald. Gail was mounted; Brandon pulled himself up behind her. Domingo caught up reins and heaved himself into his saddle, saying, "Follow me."

Gunflame showed redly from the cabin, and Brandon made out vague figures in the clearing. He felt the piebald crash against underbrush; then they hit the creek and splashed into it. Brandon reached around Gail and took the reins.

They got across the creek and into timber. Through this, Domingo found a snaky way. They were dropping downhill, sometimes following ridges, sometimes coming along the looping switchbacks of a crazy trail. After a long while they drew rein in one of those mountain meadows.

Domingo dismounted, lowered himself to the ground, and put an ear to the earth. He stood up and nodded.

"They riding," he announced. "But far away."

Brandon said bitterly, "My first notion was to get Gail, then scatter their horses so they couldn't follow. My second notion was to drag the bunch to jail. Neither worked worth a damn."

Gail asked, "How did you get on the trail?"

"I met Halliday."

"Poor Kirk! He tried to put up a fight. I hope they didn't hurt him badly."

"He'll live," Brandon said. "Give him a couple days' rest, and he'll be able to read the financial news as well as ever."

"You don't like him," she said, her voice showing a real interest in this. "Why is that?"

"He's your man," Brandon said. "Do you have to ask another man what he's like? He did the best he could today."

She turned her head, pretty and grave. "I'm grateful to you, Holt. I

haven't liked thinking of how I treated you the night you came to Dad's car. I want you to know I was never so glad to see anybody in my life as I was to see you tonight."

He had to grin. "You wanted a taste of the woolly life, girl! Did they take any of the pay-roll money from the valise?"

"Not that I saw." Her voice sounded mildly amused. "Is that the most important thing?"

"Important enough," he said.

Domingo said, "We ride."

Gail asked, "Who is this friend of yours?"

Brandon said, "I'm sorry. Gail, this is Captain Domingo. It was Domingo, really, who got you free of that cabin."

Domingo said again, "We ride," and climbed aboard his horse.

They moved through the night, but not at such a pell-mell pace. They dropped on downward, feeling their way.

In dawn's grayness they came to another meadow and here Domingo said, "We rest." Gail slipped to the ground and seated herself on a rock. Her face was gray with strain. Domingo made no move to unsaddle. He seated himself, too, and was like a black idol, his face empty. Brandon looked at Gail, his interest sharp in spite of himself.

He asked abruptly, "Why Halliday?"

"How's that?"

"You were shed of him once, and that pleased Sam. Now you've taken up with him again. To spite Sam, I suppose."

He saw the quick rise of her chin. "Maybe I love Kirk."

He shook his head. "No daughter of Sam Whitcomb's would want anything as certain sure as the years with Kirk Halliday would be."

She said with spirit, "So you work for Sam Whitcomb every minute of every day and night!"

Domingo stood up and lifted himself to the saddle. "Better ride," he said.

"Sure," Brandon said and arose. He offered his hand to Gail. "Come on."

The first sunlight found them in the foothills, the timber gone and the land undulating. Domingo dismounted and laid an ear to the ground. He looked up and said, "They come."

"Close?" Brandon asked.

"Mighty close."

"Can you tell how many?"

"Three, I think," Domingo said, and Brandon remembered the one who had screamed in the darkness and crashed across the table.

Domingo mounted again and urged his horse to a trot. Brandon did likewise; the piebald, double-burdened, had begun to flag. Domingo pulled his own mount down to a walk.

They came atop a ridge, and before them spread a great sweep of land, golden in the first light. In the far distance Brandon saw the telegraph line, but he also saw a small knot of horsemen who swept toward them. Four, he judged. Then he understood. Those four who hadn't been at the cabin last night—the ones he'd guessed had ridden to Salish to carry McCoy's terms of ransom to Sam Whitcomb. And now they were riding back.

Brandon looked behind. No sign yet of Lucas and McCoy and the

other man. But Domingo had heard them. They were coming. He looked around him. Coulees here and there.

Domingo stepped down from his saddle and dragged the Winchester from its scabbard. He motioned violently to Brandon. "Climb on my horse, suh." He pointed to the left where one of the coulees cut the earth. "Down there."

Brandon shook his head. "She can go ahead. I'll stay with you."

Domingo said, "No need." He pointed. "Look!"

Brandon stared, and for the first time saw the great body of riders sweeping down out of the northeast. They were a mile or so from the four horsemen coming from Salish, and it looked as though neither group had yet seen the other. The distance was too great for him to identify any of the larger force, but the direction from which they came told him all he needed to know. He said, "Every last man they could round up from camp, and more besides," thinking that Champ McCoy had tallied again.

Domingo said, "Take Miss Gail into the coulee."

He cradled the Winchester against his cheek and fired at the four. The distance was too great. He levered the rifle and waited, then fired again. Sixshooters sent up tiny puffs of smoke from the little group, but one among them had a rifle. The first shot gouged up dirt fifty feet ahead of where Brandon stood.

Brandon looked for shelter, but there was only one rock near by. Domingo had dropped behind it and was resting the Winchester across the top. Brandon stepped up to the saddle of Domingo's horse.

"Come on!" he shouted and swatted at the piebald's rump with his sombrero as he reined past. The piebald leaped forward. Riding stirrup to stirrup with Gail, Brandon galloped into the coulee.

Then Brandon remembered the three who were coming from behind. He swung his horse around. He heard the cough of Domingo's Winchester. Then the Winchester went silent, but Domingo raised a yell of triumph.

Brandon shouted at Gail, "Go on!" and turned the Boxed T mount around and rode back out of the coulee. He saw Domingo running toward another coulee; as he looked, the giant black bobbed out of sight. Those four riders from town had turned tail and were streaking off into the distance. The riders from camp, much closer now, had split into two bunches. The smaller of these had gone racing at an angle to give chase to the four. The rest were coming on.

Brandon swung the borrowed horse back into the coulee, and was astonished to find Gail awaiting him. "Straight ahead," he shouted. The coulee became wide enough to let them run side by side.

Half a mile along, they came around a bend and saw before them nearly a score of horsemen. Sam Whitcomb was at their head; his face looked a thousand years old till he sighted Gail. Kirk Halliday, big and awkward in a saddle, rode with the group. Jake Fargo was here, too, and Brandon recognized post-hole diggers and wire stringers and the teamster.

Gail flung herself off the piebald and made a lurching run toward Whitcomb. Dismounting, Whitcomb

caught her and held her close till Halliday got down and came and took Gail from him. Jake Fargo's whiskery face was bland, but he winked at Brandon.

Brandon said, "Seems you fetched everybody but the cook."

Whitcomb answered huskily, "It took half the night to raise enough saddle horses. But we were ready to comb the hills fine."

Brandon said, "There's a big black man around somewhere. For God's sake, don't any of you line sights on him. He's a friend."

Whitcomb said, "I think the shooting's all over." Then his face turned startled. He gazed upward at the brushy wall of the coulee, and Brandon heard the explosion of a six-shooter and realized Whitcomb was hit and going down.

The coulee became a milling chaos of horses and men. Some of the telegraph crew had guns out; their guns and Brandon's spoke, and lead clipped the leaves from bushes high above, but there was no target. Only the echo of a laugh drifted back, Brandon knew that laugh.

Champ McCoy had tallied once more. Brandon searched the coulee's rim, then slowly put his gun away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Ways of Women

THEY got Whitcomb to Salish in the afternoon and put him to bed in the Ballard House. Jonathan King dug the lead from Sam's shoulder and dressed the wound.

Brandon stood by the window and looked at Whitcomb's lined face with its thin film of sweat. He made a tired gesture with his hands.

"It adds up to a poor day," he said. "Those two that the boys rounded up are sitting in the calaboose, Sam. But I can't begin to figure the work that we lost."

Whitcomb said, "Gail's safe."

"And the pay roll," Brandon said. "But we'll have to work night shifts to catch up."

"We've got more men coming," Whitcomb reminded him. "I'll shunt them out to camp as fast as they show."

"Green hands," Brandon said disgustedly.

"We'll break them in, Holt."

King looked up. "You'll stay in bed a couple of weeks, Mr. Whitcomb. That's an order. Brandon, you see that he obeys it. He can run a telegraph line if he likes, but he'll have to do his managing from bed."

"Better hog-tie him," Brandon said.

King departed. Brandon made a move toward the door, too. In him was an impatience to be back on the job.

Whitcomb made a weak gesture. "I've got to load the whole thing on your shoulders, Holt. Till I can get out of bed."

"I know," Brandon said. "I'll make out."

"But the job includes Gail now."

"Oh, hell," Brandon said.

"She's engaged to Halliday again. Funny, I haven't got a thing against him but a feeling I can't name, Holt. If you can manage to keep her from

doing something she'll be sorry for, I'll be grateful."

"Give her your blessing," Brandon said. "Tell her you think Kirk's just fine and you hope they'll get married this evening, if not sooner. I'll bet she'll decide that she isn't half as interested in him as she thought she was."

Whitcomb shook his head. "It goes deeper than you think. You see, I'd picked a man for her and told her so. Long ago. That was a mistake. I guess it's stubbornness that drives her to Halliday. She wouldn't be fooled if I changed suddenly."

Brandon shrugged. "I'll do what I can. But I can't be out at camp and here, too."

"She'll be sticking close to my bedside as long as I'm in bad shape, Holt. If she starts getting notional about Kirk, I'll know it. And I'll get word to you."

Brandon again moved toward the door. He remembered what he owed this man, and he said in a soft voice, "Don't let a thing worry you. Just call if you need me."

"I'll do that, Holt. Don't work yourself to death. If we fail on this contract, we'll find another somewhere."

"Sure," Brandon said.

On the street, he got Domingo's big horse from the hitchrail before the Ballard House and led it along. There had been no more trace of Domingo after that coulee fracas than there'd been of Lucas and McCoy. Brandon himself had made the hunt. Two prisoners bagged, though, from the four who'd been coming from town. A pair of two-bit badmen not worth the

keep the county would now bestow upon them.

Brandon had let Gail ride the piebald to town, but he now intended to pick up the mare for the return journey to camp. He walked along the street, leading the Boxed T horse.

He saw two of his own crew before one of the saloons; these two had been part of the group that had ridden in with Whitcomb as a bodyguard of sorts. Brandon looked at the pair on the saloon steps.

"You've got your pay in your pants," he said. "I don't want you showing up tomorrow with heads you couldn't get through a barn door. Round up the others and start back to camp."

He walked along until he reached Mountain's headquarters and saw the piebald tied before the place. Through the window, he thought he made out the bulk of Kirk Halliday.

He got the Boxed T horse ready for leading and was shifting from one saddle to the other when Gail appeared in the office doorway. Her face showed an immediate interest.

"How's Dad?"

"He'll have to keep to bed for a couple of weeks," he said, more gruffly than he'd intended.

Her chin came up. "Could it be," she asked, "that you hold me responsible for Dad's stopping a bullet?"

"If you'd stayed in town in the first place, you wouldn't have got carried off. And he wouldn't have had to come hunting you."

She was beautiful in the doorway; she was proud and contrite and angry. At last she said, "What you say is true. I'm properly sorry, and I judge

that I've been spanked. What can I do, Holt?"

"You can visit him every day and sit for a while. He'd like that."

She nodded. "And I would like that, too." She smiled. "I'm grateful to you, Holt. More grateful than I know how to say."

"Thank Domingo," he said and turned away from the hitchrail and led the Boxed T horse along the street.

At once the big cayuse moved up and bit at the rump of the piebald. Brandon took the slack out of the lead rope. Passing a livery stable, he had a notion to leave the borrowed mount there but decided against this. The camp was nearer to Boxed T, and Domingo would come for the horse.

String wire, and you lose yourself in the endless race, not knowing one day from another but realizing that each day brings the deadline nearer. The ground is stubborn and repels the pick and the shovel; a batch of insulators proves inferior and has to be returned to Salish; three of your crew slip away to see the lights of town and buck the tiger and fill a painted woman's shoe with silver.

Poles are late in arriving; the crew sent to fetch them reports a brush with hidden marksmen who kept them busy with guns when they should have been using axes. The wire stringers stand idle that day. The long lightning is flung from camp to town, shouting always for more supplies, more men; and you hammer the key constantly and wish that Sam Whitcomb were up and

about and doing the job at the other end.

Thus Brandon spent his time. Again the work went on from dawn to dusk, and again the brush fires burned when the crew worked overtime. The first of the new help arrived soon after his return from Salish; green men, most of them, though some were old hands. Jake Fargo, stiff in the shoulder but otherwise a sound man, broke in the untrained ones and swapped tall tales by firelight with the old hands.

Halliday rode out to camp one day to discuss some problems of supply. Gail wasn't with him, as Brandon was quick to note.

The crew was nothing to kick about, save for the green hands, Spreading the pay-roll money around had helped, as Brandon soon admitted. Spirits were higher, and there was no more whispering that Mountain Telegraph was broke and so unable to pay off.

Still Brandon had to lash the men on, for the sands were running out. In more ways than one, he reflected. With another week behind him, he was that much nearer to Boxed T, and Templeton hadn't yet showed back.

What was it the man had said? "*I shall return within the week.*" It was well over a week now. Even Domingo hadn't showed, and the Boxed T cayuse grew fat on valley grass and lazy from no load to pack.

On a morning, Brandon called Jake Fargo to his tent. "Take over today, Jake," Brandon said. "I'm going for a ride."

"Town?"

"No, I'm going to return that horse to Boxed T."

Fargo gave him a sidelong glance. "Any point in stirring up a hive when the bees ain't buzzing?"

"Maybe not," Brandon said. "Just the same, I'm going."

"Suit yourself," Fargo said.

Brandon set out shortly, again riding the piebald and leading the borrowed horse. He knew, as Jake had known, that the horse was only an excuse; he had to know the situation at Boxed T, and this was a way to learn it.

Soon he came to the rougher country where the wind-twisted junipers stood in their eternal writhings. At last he reached the place where the land dropped away and the buildings of Boxed T sprawled below.

He picked an easy place and began the descent. He felt a tightness in his belly as he drew closer to the long, low main building. A porch ran the width of the house. Alan Templeton sat in a rocker on the porch.

Templeton had a Winchester rifle leaning against the porch railing. He stood up as Brandon brought the horses closer. He picked up the Winchester and held it loosely.

Brandon made sure that his hands were in plain sight. "Good afternoon," he said. "I've come to return a horse."

Templeton nodded. He was wearing ranch garb today, but his manner was as military as though the uniform clothed him. His voice held a grave, impersonal courtesy. "Domingo's mount, sir. He told me he'd loaned the mount to a friend who would surely return it soon. May I ask how you came by it?"

"I'm the friend," Brandon said.

Templeton's lean face clouded, and he shifted the rifle slightly. "What kind of ruse is this, man?"

Brandon shrugged. "Do you want the horse, or do I take it back?"

"Just leave the mount. One of my men will put him in the corral."

"Sure," Brandon said. "That's all I wanted. You've got your horse, and I'll be going."

Templeton relaxed a little. "I'm sorry not to be able to offer you hospitality and refreshments after your ride. You realize my position. At best, we're under an armed truce."

"Yes. I expected you back at my camp before this."

Templeton nodded. "My daughter and Captain Domingo and my physician have all tried to persuade me that I am in error about the nature of your enterprise, sir. I remain unconvinced. I have written a full report to General Longstreet and am awaiting his orders."

Don't laugh! Brandon thought. "You'll wait for an answer?" he asked.

"Not long," Templeton said. "Perhaps the general is busy. Perhaps he is wounded. The fortunes of war, you know. Shortly I shall have to act without his instructions."

Brandon lifted his reins. He had learned what he'd come to learn, and he had no argument to give Templeton. He was the enemy, because the years were all tangled in Alan Templeton's mind. No changing that.

Brandon only said now, "I hope the general will persuade you that you're wrong, Colonel."

He had wheeled his horse about and was fifty yards from the porch when

Ellen called to him: "Holt! Wait a moment!"

He neck-reined the mount and saw her come running across the yard toward him. She reached his stirrup and stood breathless, her cheeks red and her breasts heaving.

"You couldn't budge him?"

He shook his head. He looked back toward the porch. Templeton was seated again and showing no great interest in them.

"No, Ellen. He's still got his mind set."

"Domingo told me about your night in the hills and how he came to turn his horse over to you," she said. "He figured that you'd return the horse. We both hoped my father would take that as a friendly act."

"You'll have to tell Domingo his scheme didn't work," Brandon said. He smiled. "I hope all is well with you."

She said, "You mean Sherm, don't you?"

He nodded, at once knowing the faint clamor of the anger that had been his at Hashknife's line cabin. "Did Domingo tell you what happened?"

"Yes," she said, and her lips drew tight. "He told me. Last night the lantern waved. I took your advice. I tried putting it out with a rifle. I missed, I'm sure, but he didn't linger."

He saw now that she had forsaken the last of a dubious ideal, and he could guess what this had cost her.

"What next—?" he asked.

"He'll come for that iron box," she said. "Now he knows the other way will never work."

"Don't worry," he said. "He'll not be that bold." But he didn't believe

this himself, and her face told him that she didn't either. He lifted his hand and brought the horse around.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Smash the Man Down

BY FIRELIGHT, Jake Fargo, having been patient beyond endurance, asked, "How were things at the beehive?"

Brandon put his supper plate in the wrecking pan. "He's written to General Longstreet for orders." He saw Fargo's whiskery face pucker. "He's not going to wait for an answer, though. Not much longer. Better issue guns all around, Jake, and see that the men keep them handy." He yawned and stretched. "Me for my tent. The days are mighty long, you notice."

Thus Mountain's crew came to carry pistols strapped at their waists, and rifles stood stacked and ready. Brandon assigned men to stand guard by day as well as by night. To Brandon the question was not whether Templeton would come, but *when*; and there was still the menace of Lucas and McCoy and their outlaw riders.

The day after Brandon's visit to Boxed T, a freighter was stopped on his way from Salish and his wagon was overturned and burned. Lucas again. The wire was cut and left dangling, but the break was soon located and repaired.

The next morning Brandon got a message summoning him to Salish. The wire had been dictated by Sam Whitcomb and sent by one of the

town operators. M-U-S-T S-E-E Y-O-U A-T O-N-C-E, Whitcomb said.

Brandon reached Salish in mid-afternoon and went directly to the Ballard House. In the hotel hallway, he found a bored-looking man seated on a tilted-back chair. He recognized the fellow as one of Mountain's town employees. The man had a gun, not holstered but held in his lap. Brandon grinned. Sam was playing safe.

He found Whitcomb seated in a chair by the window of his room.

"King know you're out of bed?" Brandon asked.

"I whittled him down, Holt."

"You wanted to see me, Sam?"

"It's Gail," Whitcomb said.

He was a man burdened by a load beyond his bearing, and it showed on him when Brandon looked closer. New lines were in his face, and the generous mouth was drawn tight at the corners.

"She hasn't run off with Halliday?" Brandon asked, and felt himself tighten.

Whitcomb shook his head. "Halliday wants her to marry him right away. She's told me so. I asked her to wait until the line reaches Warlock, so I'd be free to stage a proper wedding. She put it up to him. He's too impatient for that. There's a preacher here, but Halliday's not of the man's persuasion, so he wants to drive her to Missoula. From there they'll go East. One of these days they'll light out. It might be today. I get the idea Halliday's determined."

Brandon shaped up a cigarette. "She'd buck your wish?" The match broke between his fingers and he fished out another.

Whitcomb grinned. "I should have stayed in bed. She was mighty attentive while I was down. I guess I got too emphatic when this marriage business came along."

Brandon spurted smoke through his nostrils. "What's to be done about it?"

"Find her and take her to camp with you," Whitcomb urged. "Keep her up there till you reach Warlock. It shouldn't be more than a couple of weeks."

"Camp's no place for her," Brandon said bluntly.

"It's the only place where she can be kept safe from him."

"Suppose she won't come?"

"Then you'll have to drag her along," Whitcomb said, his mouth growing tighter. "That's an order, Holt."

Brandon shrugged. "Where will she likely be?"

"She has a room here, three doors down the hall on this same side. If she's not in it, she's probably at headquarters with Halliday. He's been teaching her telegraphy."

"I'll wire you from camp," Brandon said.

He went along the hall to the room Whitcomb had mentioned and rapped on the door. No answer. He rapped again.

The guard said in a bored voice. "She went out about an hour ago."

Brandon said, "You could have told me before I skinned my knuckles raw."

In the street, he stepped up to the piebald's saddle and reined the mare along toward headquarters. He had to see Halliday anyway; there was that matter of the defective insulators

that had come through. If Whitcomb were on the job, mistakes like that wouldn't be happening.

He was a sour man, thinking about this, and thinking, too, of the order that had been handed him. *Build me a telegraph line, son. And in your spare time, keep my daughter from making a damned fool of herself. It's all in the day's work, boy.*

He was brought from his moodiness by the sound of his own name: "Hey, Brandon! Hold up!"

Again Champ McCoy stood on the Hogshead porch, a bigness beneath the overhang, his bright smile showing, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. It might have been that earlier encounter, save that this was daylight.

Brandon urged the piebald up to the saloon's steps and said flatly, "You're a damn' bold one, Champ, to be showing your face in town."

"And why do you say that, my friend?"

"They've got a cell in the jail just your size."

McCoy, satisfied with himself and with the world, teetered on his toes.

"And what would put me in a cell? Your word against mine? Who would listen to that big darky? Or maybe you're thinking that those two you got locked up will testify against me. I think not. 'Tis Consolidated money they'll want backing them when they come to trial. Will you come inside and have a drink? Out of my own pocket I'll pay for it."

"The hell with you, Champ," Brandon said. He folded his arms and leaned on the saddle horn. "So you weren't in that cabin up in the hills?"

"A million miles away I was. Back at Consolidated's office in the East talking big business to come. Wire and ask 'em."

"Suppose I ask Gail Whitcomb instead, Champ? Maybe she'll remember you, too."

McCoy pursed his lips. "A saucy one, that girl. Too bad you broke up the fandango when you did."

Brandon straightened in his saddle. "Meaning, Champ—?"

"Meaning Sherm might have taught her something she didn't learn in any of the fancy schools Sam Whitcomb sent her to," McCoy said. His smile turned evil. "Damned if I wouldn't have liked a hand in that. You'd feel the same, Brandon, if you didn't work for Whitcomb. A man takes his fun where he finds it. Ain't it so?"

Brandon said, "This day's been marked on the calendar for a long time, Champ." Kicking free of the stirrups, he tossed a leg over, and putting his hands to cantle and horn, he launched himself straight at McCoy.

He hit the solidness of the man, but McCoy had got his hands out of his pockets. His arms went around Brandon, and the two of them struck the porch flooring. Locked together, they rolled down the steps and almost under the hoofs of the mare. The piebald snorted and reared.

Breaking free, Brandon got to his feet and saw McCoy lurch to a stand and come at him. McCoy's fists were a swarm that stung Brandon, beating the breath from him and filling his head with a roar. He closed with McCoy in desperation and got his arms around the man and tried to pull

McCoy hard against him, but this was like having hold of an avalanche.

McCoy slipped away from him; Brandon got a grip on McCoy's plaid shirt and brought the man close. The two of them tripped and fell upon the steps and writhed there, each trying to get at the other's throat.

McCoy cursed and managed to smash a fist against Brandon's mouth. Brandon tasted the salt of his own blood. McCoy tried to get his gun free, but Brandon wrenched it from him and flung it aside.

McCoy struck at his crotch with a knee, but they were too tightly entwined for this effort to be effective. Brandon got the heel of one hand against McCoy's nose and pushed hard till McCoy, bellowing, broke free.

McCoy hauled himself up, lowered his head, and came butting at Brandon. Brandon straightened him with an uppercut and saw McCoy's arms flail wildly as the man struggled for balance. Brandon came hard after him, smashing his knuckles against the barrel of McCoy's chest, trying for another clean hit at his jaw.

McCoy went down into the dust, but he caught at Brandon's belt and dragged him down. Again they rolled over and over, in peril of the piebald's hoofs.

They were up again and standing toe-to-toe, slugging; he saw McCoy's face turn shapeless and become something from a nightmare. He knew that McCoy's fists were getting at him, too, but he was numb to pain, trying desperately for another clean hit at that jaw. But when he did find McCoy's jaw, he had no real aware-

ness of doing so; and he saw with astonishment that McCoy went down.

McCoy rolled over and pulled himself up till he was on his hands and knees. Brandon stood waiting, his arms wooden and heavy. McCoy shook his head and muttered something that made no sense. He settled very gently down to the earth and rolled over upon his back; he sighed gustily, and consciousness went out of him.

Only then did Brandon sense that a ring of men had been drawn by the fight. Townsmen and saloon hangers-on, they crowded the porch and some stood in the street; and one had led the piebald a safe distance away.

Brandon looked down at McCoy and shook his head. He took a lurching step in an unsteady world. He tried to fix his eyes on the man who held the piebald. He looked down at McCoy again and said:

"Some of you better drag him off the street."

He turned and by an effort of concentration walked to the man who held the mare and took the reins. That saddle looked higher than a mountain peak, so he chose to lead the piebald. He stopped at a horse trough and looked at his reflection in the water and saw that his lips were shapeless and puffy and that the skin was broken on his cheek and over one eye.

One of the crowd came up and said, "Here's your hat," and thrust a sombrero at him. He nodded.

He washed himself, splashing the water against his face again and again. He ducked his head in the trough and pushed back his hair with his hands.

He felt used-up and not proud of himself.

He walked on to divisional headquarters and tied the piebald at the rack and went inside. The operator on duty showed a startled face.

"Gail Whitcomb been here this afternoon?" Brandon asked.

"Out back," the operator said.

Brandon went around the end of the counter and through the back door and thus came into the wagon yard. Here, where the empty wagons waited and supplies stood heaped, he saw the familiar buggy that Halliday used for his trips to and from camp. Gail was on the seat of the buggy; Halliday had just handed her up.

Brandon said, "Wait a minute."

Gail looked at him and caught her breath. "Holt! Your face!"

Halliday turned around and gave Brandon a frown. "It sounded like a fight up the street. So you were mixed into it." His manner was that of a man forced to delay important affairs to acknowledge a triviality.

Brandon asked bluntly, "You heading to Missoula?"

Gail said, "So Dad sent you!"

"That doesn't matter," Brandon said. "Climb down."

Halliday at once turned truculent. "Now, see here—!" he began, but Brandon was done with talking. He came up to Halliday and put his hand against Halliday's chest and pushed until he had pinned the man against a buggy wheel.

Brandon said again to Gail, "Climb down," and saw the fury grow in Halliday's face to become a thing beyond control.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Tale Is Told

HALLIDAY drew in his breath and let it out in a harsh gust of sound, his face red and his shoulders hunched. Brandon watched him closely. The man brought up his fists and came off the buggy wheel.

He said hotly, "You've overstepped, Brandon. You've been edging toward insolence for a long time. I've had enough of you."

Brandon shoved at Halliday again and sent him back against the wheel. He said flatly, "There's no need to fight. You're just not going to Missoula. Get that through your head!"

Halliday struck at him. Brandon raised his arms and warded off the blow, but his arms were wooden, the movement like something done under water.

He heard Gail cry out, "Kirk! Let him alone!"

Her voice reached through Halliday's fury and turned the man's mouth slack with astonishment. He put his eyes on Brandon; his eyes shone. Then Brandon saw that gaze drop and knew that for the moment Halliday had lost.

Brandon seized this shift in the situation for all it was worth. He swung up into the buggy, clambered over a suitcase, and with a quick motion unwrapped the reins from around the whipstock. He hauled on the reins and backed the buggy.

Halliday leaped toward the buggy; his voice lifted. But Brandon, cramping the front wheels hard, had got the buggy around, and he shouted at the horse and slapped the reins and went

wheeling through the rear gate of the wagon yard at a hard run.

He brought the buggy down the alley and turned a corner crazily and turned another and so came into the main street. He sawed on the reins and pulled the buggy up alongside the boardwalk.

"Which is his suitcase?" he asked.

Gail stared at him, her face puzzled. She nodded toward the suitcase at their feet.

"I'll drop it off at headquarters," he said. "We'll keep yours. You're going to camp with me."

"Dad's orders?" she asked.

"That doesn't matter. The point is that you're going."

She laughed. "Do you know, you're the only man in the world who would think that such a simple idea would work? Can't you see that the best you can hope is to delay the marriage? I'll steal a horse at camp. Or I'll catch a ride with one of the freighters the first moment your back is turned. Tomorrow, maybe. Or the day after, or the day after that."

He saw only one way to delay her. "Where's that preacher—the one Halliday didn't favor?"

Her face turned blank with surprise. "What do you want with him?"

"I want to know where he lives. Better tell me. I can ask any man on the street."

Her lips showed mild amusement. "The square log house to the left, down at the west end. Just before you get out of town."

The extra suitcase forgotten, he slapped the horse with the lines and set the buggy rolling again. He trotted the horse along the street to the far fringe of Salish and saw the little log

house Gail had indicated. He pulled the buggy before the gate and swung to the ground and offered his hand to Gail.

"Get down," he said firmly. He saw rebellion in her face, and puzzlement. She hesitated, then took his hand and let him help her alight.

He got her by the elbow and steered her through the gate and up to the door of the house. He knocked; the door opened and a plump, gray-haired woman with a friendly, bovine face stood before him.

Brandon asked, "Is the preacher home?"

The woman said, "Come in. Come in."

Brandon thrust Gail ahead of him into a little parlor. A man scratched with a pen at an immense desk, a lanky man, bony of face, bony of figure.

Brandon asked, "You an ordained preacher?"

The man looked at him. "I am, sir. I'd judge that you require the services of a doctor rather than those of a minister of the gospel."

Brandon said, "Don't fret yourself over that. I want you to marry the two of us."

Gail drew in a startled breath, and the preacher looked from Brandon to her. Whatever the man read in her face stiffened his own.

"Is this your wish, too, miss?"

"No," Gail said firmly. "It isn't."

"I can have no part in this," the preacher said.

Brandon lifted his gun from its holster and said, "The hell with arguments. Will you get your book and get to work with it?"

The preacher stood up, swallowed

hard, and said, "Now, see here—I" and let the words trail off.

Brandon waggled the gun. From the corner of his eye he saw Gail standing stiff and remote, understanding his intention now but not quite believing, if he were any judge. The preacher was both a terrified man and an angry one, but not angry enough to itch for martyrdom.

His wife stood by the door, her broad face speculative. She said, "You go ahead and marry them, Abner."

Brandon looked at her, not expecting such an ally. The preacher stood up with a shrug and picked a small black book from a pigeonhole of the huge desk. He thumbed it with nervous hands but found the right page through long familiarity.

He said in empty tones, "Stand together. Now take her right hand."

Brandon cased his gun and reached and got Gail's hand. He expected her to show fight, but her hand lay limp in his. He had a fleeting reluctance. He heard the preacher's voice drone away, but he did not look at Gail. He answered the questions that were put to him. The preacher had forgot to ask their names beforehand and so stumbled at the questions.

"Do you, er, miss, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband—?" Brandon heard Gail's small "Yes."

There was some awkwardness about there being no ring. "It isn't required," the preacher said hastily when Brandon stared at him. Finally the preacher closed his book. "... I now pronounce you man and wife."

Brandon turned and drew Gail to him and kissed her. She did not re-

spond to his lips, but she did not avoid them.

The preacher's wife had lifted a corner of her apron and was dabbing clumsily at her eyes. She said, "Don't mind me. I do this every time Abner ties a young couple together. I just can't help it. The marryings are even harder on me than the burials."

She came forward and put her big arms around Gail and held Gail close. She crooned at Gail's ear.

Brandon said to the preacher, "I want this in writing."

The preacher slumped down at his desk and worked on a form with his pen. Brandon folded the paper and tucked it away and laid money on the desk. The preacher looked at him unhappily, his lips twitching with words unspoken. Then he looked at his wife and held silent.

The woman opened the door. Brandon got Gail by the elbow again, and they passed through the doorway and went along the walk. He handed Gail up into the buggy and climbed to the seat beside her.

He said, "I suppose you've got all the clothes you'll need. There's still Halliday's suitcase to drop off. And I want to get my horse."

She said in a small voice, "Do you think for one minute you can make this ridiculous business stick?"

He said grimly, "I can make it stick for a lot of minutes. Sure, you can get the marriage annulled. That's what the woman whispered in your ear, isn't it? The preacher will back your claim that it was a forced marriage. But you'll have to get away from camp first, and you'll have to go all the way to the territorial

capital at Helena. Meantime, you can't marry anybody else."

She said, "If my father had asked you to throttle me, you'd have done that, too, I think."

"He didn't say anything about that."

She said angrily, "You are absolutely the most insufferable man I've ever met!"

He grinned. "Now is that any way for a bride to be talking?"

He brought the buggy around and went clattering up the street. He drove to Mountain's headquarters, and here he climbed down and reached in for Halliday's suitcase. He had his back to the doorway as he did this.

Gail had sat stiff beside him on the short ride, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes straight ahead. A sudden flash of expression on her face was his warning—this and her quick "Hold!"—and he flung about to see Halliday in the doorway, a gun in his hand and his feet planted wide apart.

Whether the man had seen the buggy stopped before the preacher's house and thus guessed what had happened, Brandon couldn't know. But he heard Halliday curse him; he saw the wildness in Halliday's eyes, and that gun was the biggest thing in the world.

Gail cried, "No, Kirk! No!" but it was a feeble straw to stem the tide of the man's fury.

Halliday cursed again. Brandon had one hand on the suitcase; he lifted it and shouted, "Here it is!" and flung it at Halliday.

He saw it strike the man's huge chest and drive Halliday backward. He saw Halliday's arm swing up in an instinctive gesture to protect himself.

The gun exploded, but the bullet went upward.

Brandon made his leap. He got into the doorway and was upon Halliday; he drove the man back against the counter where the telegraph instruments stood. He grappled for Halliday's wrist and got hold of it and twisted hard. He heard the gun drop. He stepped back from Halliday and kicked at the gun and sent it spinning across the floor.

Brandon said, "That's all, Kirk."

Halliday stood with his face inflamed and his great chest heaving. He lifted his hands and let them fall. He said, "This is an unfinished fight, Brandon."

"Some other day," Brandon said. He walked to the fallen gun and picked it up. He looked at the startled operator behind the counter and said, "Catch," and tossed the gun to him. He walked from the office, stepping over Halliday's suitcase.

Gail still sat in the buggy. He got his piebald from the hitchrail and tied the mare behind the buggy and climbed back into the seat. Beyond the town, he struck due north.

Gail said then, "I thought you might underestimate what he can do with a gun, since he's an Easterner. I've seen him at target practice."

He said, "Twice you tried to keep us apart—once in the wagon yard and once just now."

"The first time wouldn't have been a fair fight," she said. "You had just been through one battle, and it showed plainly on you. The second time was different. You had a gun, too, but that only meant that one of you was going to end up dead. Maybe both of you. I didn't want that."

He stole a glance at her and saw that she was again as stiff-faced as she had been after the stop at the preacher's. Remembering what had happened there, he was not a proud man.

Presently he laughed. "I was going to speak to Halliday about some insulators," he said. "Trouble is, he never gave me a chance."

She said unhappily, "Every thought you have is for Sam Whitcomb. I suppose I should be proud that any man is so loyal to my father. But I wonder what makes you so."

He was silent for a time. Then he glanced at Gail and said, "In Texas, after the war, I knew a boy named Buck Elliot. Yankee troops were stationed in our town, and they locked up Buck's father in the courthouse. Old Judge Elliot, he was. Buck was sixteen; I was fourteen. A pair of crazy kids. We figured to challenge the Yankee major to a gun fight on the street. We drew straws to see who'd do the job. I won."

She turned her face toward him, her eyes grave. "And you did the shooting?"

He shook his head. "I was posted on the street, waiting for the major to show. I was holding the gun behind me. A stranger came along, and his eyes were sharp. He looked at me and smiled and said, 'Mighty big gun for a young lad, isn't it?' After we'd jawed a bit, he got the whole story from me in spite of myself. Then he gave me a talk about how foolish it was to keep fighting a war that was over. He was in Texas to string a telegraph line, he said. He had a job for a boy just my size. He was leaving for his camp right away, and there was room in his wagon for me."

"Dad!" she said, understanding.

"Sam Whitcomb."

"So you never braced the Yankee major."

His mouth tightened. "Buck Elliot did that the very next day. Put a bullet in the man's arm. I heard about the trial afterward. They gave him twenty years in a military prison, which is what I'd have got. All that was seventeen years ago. So, you see, I've got three more years to serve."

Her eyes were wide, holding something akin to both sadness and anger. "You've believed, then, that you owe my father twenty years of your life? You've stood by him all this time for that reason?"

"Could there be a better one?"

She only shook her head. She held silent for a long time in which the clatter of buggy wheels and the constant clop of the horse's hoofs became loud.

Finally she said, "Till now, I think I have half hated you. Now I feel sorry for you instead. I would rather that I hated you. Can you understand that?"

He looked down at his fists holding the reins; his bruised knuckles hurt from the tightness of his grip. "Yes," he said. "I guess I can."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Came Domingo

IN THE broad sweep of the Valley of the Three Sisters, Mountain's late campfire made a beacon that drew Brandon across the last dark miles. Gail had fallen asleep, sagging against his shoulder, and he was a

moody man, and alone, driving in the night. He was deep-stirred by her presence. She was now his wife. He faced this reality and found it hollow.

She came awake when they were challenged by the outer guards, and he heard the quick intake of her breath as full knowledge came to her of her whereabouts. She moved away from him. He drove on until he was nearly into the rim of the firelight, and here he dismounted and gave his hand to her.

Jake Fargo moved up, plainly worried. "You was gone a lot longer than I expected. Say, ain't that Miss Whitcomb with you?"

Brandon had already gauged how far the camp had moved northward since he had left and was pleased by the day's work. He nodded. "Rig up one of the small tents for her, Jake."

Fargo demanded, "How long'll she be staying?"

"Till tomorrow. Maybe the day after. Maybe the day after that. How do I know?"

Fargo moved closer and squinted hard at Brandon.

"What the hell happened to your face, Holt?"

"A round with Champ McCoy," Brandon said. "Will you get that tent ready, Jake?"

"Sure," Fargo said and made off.

Brandon turned toward Gail. "Would you like something to eat while you're waiting?"

"Later, perhaps."

"I'll have Jake bring something to the tent."

Fargo came back shortly to announce that the tent was ready. He indicated where it stood, and Gail moved away.

Brandon ate slowly and morosely. Some of the crew were still up, and he could feel their eyes on his battered face. Well, Jake had the answer and could pass it around. He finished with the food and walked away from the firelight.

Gail's suitcase was still in the buggy. Brandon took it and carried it to her tent. Light glowed dimly behind the canvas. He called her name softly.

"Yes," she said. She opened the flap and stood there before him. She looked at him expectantly, not voicing the question as to why he was here, and her soft fragrance seemed almost to reach out to him. He put his hand toward her and saw fear show quickly in her eyes.

He said, "Here's your suitcase," and set it at her feet.

In his own tent, he thought of Sam Whitcomb. He opened the line to Salish and reported merely that Gail was at the camp. The Salish operator acknowledged the message and promised to deliver it to Sam at once. Brandon blew out his light a few minutes later and rolled into his blankets.

Sleep came slowly. He thought of Gail in that yonder tent and reflected that this was a hell of a way for a man to be spending his wedding night. The forced marriage now seemed to him a brutal and stupid thing to have done. He had a sense of defeat, a feeling of having lost far more than he'd gained.

She was about when he came to the breakfast fire next morning. She gave him a cool nod, no more than that.

He was soon busy at lining out his crew, and shortly he was up with the

post-hole diggers, and she was lost to him somewhere in the welter of the camp behind. He wondered if he should put Jake to keeping an eye on her, but he decided against this. He could not hold her, really.

He saw Gail again in the afternoon, after the camp had been dismantled and the cooking outfit and tents moved up to the farthest point the poles would reach that day. She had got one of the camp horses saddled, and she rode to where the post-hole diggers worked. Here she sat watching, her eyes alive with interest.

Brandon came and stood by her stirrup. "A hot day for work," he said.

She said, civilly enough, "The man I don't envy is the one who follows behind, trimming off tree branches that scrape the wire. The day is far too sultry for climbing."

His attention quickened. "You've watched him work?"

She nodded. It was his immediate thought that if she had fallen to the rear of the project, where the trimmer worked, there had been nothing to keep her from heading on south to Salish. This thought must have stood naked on his face, for she shook her head.

"No, I wasn't tempted to bolt. You've probably got all of them keeping an eye on me. You'd have had your fun then, taking out after me and dragging me back. I shan't give you that pleasure. When I pick my time to go, the laugh will be on you."

He said stiffly, "I'm the only man who knows why you're here." Then he put his back to her and strode away about his business.

He was sure she'd be gone that night, but she was at the supper fire. She was a merry one with the crew, bright as the flame; she laughed at their talk and had a cool reserve only for Brandon.

Later he walked to Gail's tent. She had a lantern aglow inside, and her silhouette loomed big and lively on the canvas. He called her name and heard her soft "Yes—?"

"If you want to leave tomorrow, I'll send a man with you to Salish."

Her shadow moved; he saw that she had flung back her head, but she didn't open the tent flap. "New orders from Dad?"

"My own notion," he said.

"Why?"

He had no answer for her; he had only a feeling that to free her would be to free himself from the sense of wrong-doing he'd had since yesterday.

"Shall I tell one of the men to be ready to ride?"

"I'll let you know tomorrow," she said.

He went to his tent and lay sleepless, wondering why she had not leaped at his offer. It came to him that he did not want her to leave; she had brightened the camp tonight as it had never been brightened before. Well, he would have her answer in the morning. He put her from his mind and burrowed deeper in his blankets.

In the morning, after breakfast had been eaten and the crew had strung out, Gail appeared at the breakfast fire, jaunty and gay and heedless of Brandon till he sought her out.

"Are you heading for town?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I think it will

be more fun to slip away from you. To go as I please, rather than at your order."

He said, "But you can't go alone!"

"Yes, I can."

Anger rose in him. His thought was that Sherm Lucas prowled out yonder somewhere, and fear put a brassy taste in his mouth.

"In the name of sense, Gail, think before you do anything foolish." He walked away from her and heard her laughter follow him.

Later, when he had joined the wire stringers, Domingo came riding up. The guards had raised a shout that brought Brandon running; and when he saw the wet flanks of the horse and the tired slump to Domingo's huge shoulders, he asked, "What is it, Captain?"

Domingo said, "Lucas attacking the place, suh."

Work had stopped. Men gathered around the two of them, jostling and voicing their questions. Gail was here, too.

Brandon asked, "Is the place under siege?"

Domingo nodded.

"How did you get through?"

"I was riding the high lonesome last night. Early this morning, I see 'em from the rimrock, suh. Lucas's men all round the house. No use to fight through that line."

"How many men in Lucas's bunch?"

"Five, near as I could count."

Brandon stepped up to the saddle of his piebald. "I'll go back with you." He spied Fargo's whiskery face in the crowd. "Take over here, Jake. Get these men back to their work."

Domingo showed disappointment.

"I'd hoped you'd fetch yo' men."

Gail had worked her way to Brandon's stirrup. She reached up and tugged at his sleeve. "You mean you're going alone?"

"I owe Boxed T something," he said. "It's a personal thing. The job of this crew is to put up telegraph poles."

She tilted her head toward Domingo. "I owe this man something myself. Holt, take the crew!"

"No," he said. "I know what I'm doing, believe me. I go alone."

"Nothing will jar you from your notion?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"How long will you be gone?"

He looked out across the land. "Three hours, I suppose. An hour to get there, an hour to get back. That leaves time for whatever trouble there is." He looked at Domingo. "Let's get going. Do you want a fresh horse?"

Domingo lifted his big shoulders and let them fall. He said, "Miles left in this one, suh," and neck-reined the mount about.

Brandon picked his way through the gathered men and swung about in the saddle. "Get back to your work!" he shouted. "We're only a couple of weeks from deadline." He faced forward and drew up beside Domingo, and they galloped stirrup to stirrup.

A mile this side of where the land dropped away, they stopped to breathe their horses. Brandon got down to adjust the cinch. Domingo sat his saddle, a remote spirit and a sad one, not looking at Brandon.

Brandon said explosively, "Damn it, man, I'd have fetched them all if there'd been any real need!"

Domingo shrugged.

"But you said there were only five in Lucas's bunch," Brandon persisted. "Ellen told me there were five in Boxed T's crew, not counting you. Templeton can handle a gun, can't he? When you and I ride down, there'll be eight against five." He climbed back into the saddle. "The two of us should tip the balance."

Domingo said, "Boxed T got no crew, suh."

"Got no crew!"

"Miss Ellen laid them off a week ago, 'ceptin' me."

"Why, man? Why?"

"Happen after that night you met Miss Ellen up on the rim. You had some talk with her about how the crew gonna be outlawed if they fight the telegraph. She knew they fight if Colonel Templeton ask them. So she pay 'em off and send 'em away, suh."

Brandon remembered how deserted the ranch had been four days ago when he'd returned Domingo's horse, and suddenly sweat was cold on his skin. He looked back to the south, across the distance they had covered. "Why in hell didn't you tell me at camp?"

"You the only one owe anything to Boxed T."

"Yes," Brandon said and saw himself trapped by his own stubbornness. Again he looked to the south; he measured the distance to camp. "We'll have to go on," he said.

They touched spurs to their mounts and held to a gallop until they were nearly to the rim. Then they pulled down to a walk, Brandon listened hard for the sound of guns, but silence held. This worried him and his nagging thought was: *Too late! Too*

late! They eased up to the drop-off and looked down upon the sprawling buildings; and Brandon sagged with the suddenness of relief.

Only peace dwelt below. The ranch yard drowsed beneath the sullen sky; a few horses stood idly in the corrals. But even at this distance Brandon could make out Colonel Templeton in the rocker on the porch, and when he peered harder, he saw Templeton's Winchester leaning against the porch railing. No other human showed but Templeton.

"They've beaten them off!" Brandon said. "Damned if they haven't beaten them off!"

Domingo, too, was peering. He said slowly, "I dunno. I just dunno," and Brandon wondered what jungle instinct put doubt in this big man.

"I'm going down," Brandon said and touched his boot against the piebald. "That's the only way we'll find out."

Domingo followed. Brandon heard rock roll beneath the hoofs of their horses. He could not see Domingo, but he could still feel the grave doubt of the black. Then it struck Brandon.

A girl and an addled old man. How had these two turned back five such as Sherm Lucas and Champ McCoy and their men? But yonder sat Templeton with his rifle, making a picture that spoke of victory.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dark Hour

SOMEWHERE in that descent it came to Brandon how it might have been at Boxed T. The iron box was the key—the box of valuables

which Templeton had once kept in the Salish bank. That box was what had brought Lucas here to lay siege; and Ellen, seeing the face of defeat, had given Lucas the box, and thereafter Lucas had shaken the dust of the ranch.

Yet Brandon was not completely satisfied with his conclusion and so found no real comfort in it. He rode on.

Smoke from the ranch-house chimney, a lazy lift of it, as though Ellen might be keeping a coffeepot warm. Horses switching their tails in the corals.

On level ground and walking the piebald steadily toward the house, Brandon saw jagged stars in the window behind Templeton. Forty-fives had torn those holes in the glass.

He kept his eyes on Templeton's lean face. Templeton neither smiled nor frowned; the man watched them as intently as though he were memorizing them.

Brandon advanced to the exact point he had reached when he'd returned Domingo's horse to this ranch. He pulled up and saw from a corner of his eye that Domingo was nearly beside him.

He asked, "What happened here, man?" putting the question to the colonel. Templeton rocked gently, not giving him an answer; and Brandon saw Ellen then.

She had appeared in the open doorway to Templeton's right; she stood framed in that doorway, and the first thing Brandon noticed was how ghostly her face showed. The second thing was that she wore a holstered forty-five, just as she had the last two times he'd seen her. The gun re-

assured him. Her lips moved, but no words reached to him, and he had the feeling that he had suddenly gone deaf.

He swung down from his saddle and let the reins drop, anchoring the piebald. Just then Domingo roared out a single wild word: "No!"

This brought Brandon half around. He saw Domingo jerk out his hand gun and raise it; he saw Domingo's arm come up with the gun, but something moved across Domingo's broad black face, and Domingo tossed the gun to the ground.

Brandon saw Sherm Lucas then. He stood directly behind Ellen, and that closeness was what had altered Domingo's judgment and taken the fight out of him. It also stayed Brandon's own hand.

Lucas had a gun on them. He said, looking straight at Brandon, "You can shed yours, too, bucko," and Brandon gingerly lifted his gun from its holster and let it drop.

Lucas said, "Come in here. Both of you."

Something stirred in Brandon that was more rage than fear. He had smelled this trap but not quite sharply enough; he had walked into it like a blundering steer into a slaughterhouse. He set his boot to the porch step and heard saddle leather creak and Domingo move to his side. He climbed the steps and felt Templeton's eyes. On Templeton's aristocratic face a great sorrow lay.

He said, "I couldn't speak. Not for fear of Ellen."

Brandon said, "It's okay."

Now he saw the dark stain of blood on Templeton's shirt, over the colonel's right ribs, and the slight bulge

that showed that Templeton wore a bandage beneath his shirt. Casualty of war. Brandon faced the door. Lucas had his gun in his right hand; he put his left arm around Ellen's waist and pulled her back against him and backed with her deeper into the house.

Brandon came in, Domingo behind him. A man stood on either side of the front window. Another was posted in a far corner. Champ McCoy sat sprawled in a chair.

McCoy said, "Ah, Brandon, it's good to see you. Pull up a chair and make yourself at home. Take the handiest one. Don't tire yourself."

But it was a long table toward which Brandon looked; on it sat that black security box fastened with a tiny padlock. Upon the wall a banjo clock marked off the minutes, making a loud clamor.

Lucas said, "Bring the old fellow in here, too," and one of the men moved from the window. Lucas had released Ellen and stepped a pace away from her, holding his gun idly. Templeton came in, herded ahead of the man who had gone after him.

The colonel carried his Winchester. He leaned it against a wall. "Empty," he said.

"Mine too," Ellen said in a dead voice, and Brandon saw now that her cartridge belt had been stripped of shells. He began to understand how the trap had been set.

Templeton turned to Lucas. "Would you mind if I went to my room and lay down?"

Lucas shrugged. "One of you boys keep an eye on his bedroom door."

Templeton moved to a door leading off from this room. Here he paused

and looked about at the assembled men. Fury stood strong in his eyes.

"You're a bunch of mongrel dogs. You are not fit even to be guerrillas. Another day I will rout the pack of you." He moved on into his bedroom with McCoy's laughter loud.

Brandon said, "Take twenty years off him, and you'd not have found him so easy to handle, Champ."

Lucas stared at Domingo. "We saw you on the rimrock this morning, damn you. Get over in a corner now and put your back to the wall. Jay, you lift that bowie out of his boot top. That's right."

McCoy grinned. "Sure and we figured the black was going for help, and where would he go but to Mountain's camp? That made a scared man out of Sherm. He expected your whole crew to be at your heels. But I knew you'd not drag your men from a job with a deadline so close and the miles so many. But you'd come yourself, for you were in cahoots with this big black before. That was my bet."

"Well," Brandon said, "you won it."

Ellen said in her empty voice. "Dad got wounded when they rushed the house. They bandaged him up to trap you, Holt. He was to be out there with the rifle. You were to believe that all was well here."

Brandon said, "I was a slow one."

Lucas said, "We've got to get moving. One of you boys get our horses out of the barn and bring them around front. Saddle a Boxed T horse for the girl. She's coming, too." He looked at Ellen. "Maybe for a night, maybe for a week. You shot at me when I showed a lantern on the rim. I hope there'll be that much fight in

you when we make camp. I'll like that."

Brandon said in a flat and terrible voice, "You can find no trail so twisted I won't be able to follow it, Lucas. Just remember that, before you drag her out of here."

Lucas laughed. "Hell," he said, "you'll be dead."

McCoy said, "My frolic first, Sherm," and came out of the chair, his battered face smiling. He drew his gun but put it in his left hand. He walked toward Brandon, made a fist of his right hand, and, still smiling, slammed that fist at Brandon's face. Brandon pulled his head aside, and McCoy's knuckles grazed against his cheek and caromed off his ear. Brandon's feet went out from under him, and he sat down heavily.

"Get up!" McCoy roared.

Brandon pulled himself slowly to a stand. He saw McCoy's fist lift again, but he heard Lucas say fiercely, "Quit it, Champ! I want him conscious for what I've got for him." McCoy's great chest heaved, and his eyes were savage, but he stepped back.

Lucas said, "Time to be getting out of here. Hasn't anybody started for those horses yet? Wrap up that iron box in a slicker, Champ; we'll pry it open later." He looked at Brandon. "And now, I'm going to put a bullet in you."

McCoy said, "Low, Sherm. In the belly. So he'll go down to kick on the floor."

Brandon said, "You're a sweet one, Champ."

Lucas lifted his gun and spread his legs apart and looked across half the room at Brandon. Lucas began cursing him, low at first, his voice rising

and the vileness pouring out, flailing himself to the pitch where anger would justify him. Brandon read the mounting fury in the man's eyes and turned desperate.

Brandon said, "Get it done with." He was conscious of the great bulk of Domingo tense in a far corner; he whispered in his mind for Domingo to do no rash thing. He was aware that Ellen stood apart from Lucas, but he could get no real glimpse of her. He had to keep his eyes on Lucas. All the others were thus riveted, too; even McCoy stood spellbound.

The gun leveled and steadied in Lucas's hand; Lucas turned silent, and in the silence the banjo clock beat steadily on the wall. And then a gun exploded.

Lucas turned around in a fast spin, his eyes stricken and his face contorted and his hands clutching for a hold on the air. His gun dropped from his hand, and he went down heavily.

Ellen had a gun in her hand, the one she had carried in her holster. She swung it in a wide arc and cried, "Easy! All of you!" her voice near to hysteria. "This gun is loaded!"

Brandon broke free of the trance first, and moved. He got across the room and snatched at the gun McCoy wore. He stepped back so that he had every man within his range of vision.

He said, "Domingo, take the rest of them!" and found that he'd shouted it. He saw Domingo move from the corner and go to the other men, one by one, and lift their guns.

From the bedroom, Templeton's voice asked weakly, "What happened?"

Ellen said, "The trouble's over, Dad."

Brandon moved to her and got an arm around her and said, "All over, Ellen."

She let her gun fall to the floor. "There was only one shell," she said. "I bluffed."

Brandon stared. "They only thought they'd unloaded the gun? They missed one shell?"

"I had it in my pocket," she said. "They were satisfied to strip my gun belt; they never thought to search me. I got the shell into the gun while Sherm was cursing you. It was that shell you gave me the night Domingo and I hauled you out of the rocks. The one you said to send if I ever needed help."

He shook his head. He looked at the form of Sherm Lucas on the floor, shapeless as a bit of melted *cunjer* wax by a distant campfire. He raised his eyes to Domingo, and the black man looked at Lucas, too, and nodded.

"One shell, and a bluff," McCoy said and began cursing.

Brandon said, "Domingo, herd all of them out of the house and tie them up somewhere. In a harness shed, maybe. Can you handle them alone?"

Domingo nodded and wagged one of the guns he had confiscated. The three men moved sullenly toward the door leading to the porch. Domingo looked at McCoy, who pulled himself to his feet and joined them. Afterward Brandon urged Ellen toward the door. He got her to the porch and let her drink in the air.

She said feebly, "My father needs a doctor."

"We'll get one soon," he said. "I'll

ride back to camp and use the wire. Salish can get hold of Doc King and have him on his way here in another hour."

"That's good," she said. She leaned her weight against him. Presently she began to weep.

After a while he said, "Look," and she lifted her gaze and let it follow his to the top of the rimrock, where riders came pouring. At their head rode Gail, and with her was Jake Fargo.

"My crew," he said.

Ellen asked in astonishment, "You told them to follow you?"

"No," he said, "but I'm not surprised they've come."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Broken Lightning

MOUNTAIN'S crew came off the slope and rode into the yard and swirled there, the horses milling. Gail was the first to dismount; she slipped down and led her horse to the foot of the steps and looked up at Brandon and Ellen, and was voiceless.

He said, "All's well here now. But I'm glad you came." He saw Jake Fargo emerge from the group and come to a stand beside Gail. "Lucas is dead in the parlor. The rest of them are disarmed. Colonel Templeton was wounded and is in bed. We'll wire for King."

Fargo said, "The line's cut, Holt."

Brandon shook his head. "But I opened to Salish early this morning, just as a matter of routine."

Fargo's whiskery face puckered.

"Then it was cut since. I tried checking on some supplies shortly after you left. That wire was dead as could be. The supplies came rolling in a little later, and the freighter said there'd been no dangling wire while there was daylight to see. Miss Whitcomb figured there might be a tie-up between the cut line and the attack on this ranch. She ordered us all to saddles, and we hit out for here.

"I sent Bruce to look for the break and make repairs," Fargo went on. "But there's an awful lot of miles of line to check, Holt. You know how hard it will be to find a buckskin splice."

"I know," Brandon said. "Jake, tell a couple of the boys to move Sherm Lucas out of the parlor. Then you come with me."

Ellen said to Gail, "Won't you come inside where you can rest?"

Gail looked down at her skirts and began to beat the dust from them. Then she raised her eyes to Ellen. This was the first meeting of these two, and they gave each other a frank appraisal.

In the ranch yard, Brandon encountered Domingo. The Negro gave him a wide and toothy smile.

Brandon said, "Got those four locked up, Captain?" When Domingo nodded, he said, "Bring McCoy out." Domingo headed for the barn. Jake Fargo came running across the yard.

Brandon shouted, "Find me a saddle rope, Jake." Fargo turned back toward Mountain's crew and returned bringing Brandon a lariat.

Jake asked, "Shouldn't we be heading back to camp?"

"A first thing first," Brandon said. He hefted the rope in his hand.

Domingo came out of the barn, pushing McCoy ahead of him. McCoy's hands were bound behind his back.

Brandon asked, "Where did you cut our line, Champ?"

McCoy said, "What the hell you talking about?"

Brandon said grimly, "Fetch him over to yonder corral gate," and strode across the yard to stand beneath the crossbar over the gate.

McCoy looked at the rope Brandon carried and stood stubbornly until Fargo gave him a hard shove. When the three came up, Brandon stared at McCoy's battered face.

"You made a right guess that when Domingo came to my camp for help I'd ride with him and leave my crew at work. But it might have crossed your mind that I'd wire Salish and tell them of the attack. Every rancher within reach would have been willing to ride in a posse against Lucas. So you took care of that."

He shook out the noose and sent it spinning up and over the crossbar. The rope fell and struck McCoy's shoulder. Brandon lifted the noose and settled it around McCoy's neck. "Who's guessing right this time, Champ?"

McCoy began cursing.

Brandon said in a flat voice, "We need that wire open, and fast. You'll tell us where that cut was made." He jerked at the rope and took the slack out of it. He leaned back, putting his weight on the rope until he had hauled McCoy up to his tiptoes.

Fargo said, "My God, Holt! We're not the law!"

Brandon eased up on the rope, and McCoy's feet flattened against the ground.

"Talk, Champ!" Brandon said.

McCoy strangled and coughed until he had recovered his voice. "How did we know this big ducky would be free of the ranch and able to ride to a telegraph line?"

"You didn't, Champ. You were just guarding against any such slip."

"You damn' fool!" McCoy roared.

"We were here at dawn. How the hell could we have cut your wire this morning?"

Brandon pounced on this. "So you *did* know it was cut this morning! I hadn't told you *when*, Champ. You fixed it with someone to have the wire cut this morning. Not one of Lucas's regular bunch; they were all here. Who did it, Champ? And where did you have him make the cut?"

"The hell with you!" McCoy said.

Brandon got both hands on the rope again and tugged.

"Halliday!" McCoy shouted.

"Yes," Brandon said, and was somehow not surprised. "Where, Champ?"

"About fifteen miles out of Salish the line passes through that first big clump of trees. A man could work there in broad daylight and never be seen. And you'd never have found the break."

"Because you had Halliday put in a splice," Brandon said. He let the rope drop. "Lock him up again, Captain."

McCoy's face knotted to complete hardness. "I'm going to get you, Brandon, and I'm going to get Sam Whitcomb. It's a promise I'm making. Fixing Whitcomb will be for Consolidated, but getting you will be for

my own pleasure. On some dark night, I'll be after you."

Brandon said wearily, "This time you'll not be able to swear you were back East in Consolidated's office while the frolic was going on. I'm glad to be done with you, Champ."

Jake Fargo expelled a long, harsh breath. "I think you'd have bluffed him till his face turned black, Holt."

"Was I bluffing?" Brandon asked.

He turned and walked away. He climbed the porch steps and walked through the open doorway into the parlor. Gail sat alone in the room, her hands idle in her lap. He thought of the knowledge now his and remembered that Gail had not long ago been on her way to marry Halliday. The full truth must soon be hers, but he could spare her now.

"Where's Ellen?"

Gail nodded toward Templeton's bedroom. Brandon walked inside. The colonel lay beneath blankets; his face was white against the pillow, but his eyes opened.

Ellen sat beside the bed. Of her Brandon asked, "How is he?"

"Resting," she said. "He seems in no real pain, but I wish Jonathan were here."

Brandon said, "I've found out where the line was cut. I just stepped in to say I'm leaving now to have it repaired. Then we'll get word to King." He saw how much this day had taken out of her. "Don't worry," he said.

He turned back toward the door, but Templeton called weakly, "One minute, sir."

"Yes," Brandon said.

"I seem to owe you an apology, but I must ask your indulgence until my

strength is greater." He passed his slim fingers over his face. "I know now that you have meant us no harm. On the contrary, you have been our ally. My daughter tells me that your force is at my door, come here to help rout those guerrillas. I'm also told that your telegraph line will now serve me by fetching Doctor King. I am convinced that you are no enemy of the Confederacy, sir, I shall instruct Captain Domingo that you are to have our fullest co-operation."

"Thank you," Brandon said. "I've got to be riding now." He drew himself erect and raised his hand in a stiff, military salute, and there was nothing ludicrous in the gesture.

"Ride well," Templeton said, and lifted his hand and let it fall.

Brandon stepped back into the parlor and would have strode past Gail, but instead he paused.

"I'm going all the way to Salish. I'll appreciate it if you'll stay at the camp until I get back. I'll make it by tomorrow at the latest."

Her face livened so suddenly that he wondered at her intuition. "Holt," she asked, "what are you hiding from me?"

He could make no answer, so left the room and the house. The crew stood waiting by their horses in the yard. He picked up the piebald's reins; and because the old habit still clung to him, he said, "Try to get a few poles set before sundown."

He skirted the crew and led his mount toward the slope. He was just climbing to saddle when he heard his name called and Ellen came running after him. She reached him and stood by his stirrup and looked up at him.

"I just had to thank you," she said.

"It's the other way around," he said, and remembered a gun's roar beating back from the parlor walls. "That was a close thing."

She shook her head. "It goes beyond what happened when Sherm had us trapped. I watched your face while you talked to my father just now. I saw you salute him. That was something more than humoring a crazy one."

Brandon said, "Yes. He doesn't need our pity."

Ellen's face softened. "I understand. When Sherm attacked this morning, I had a foolish hope that the shock of such a battle might jar my father from that old shock of long ago. Now I know he will always be as he is. I have lived with his sickness for a long time. Now it will be easier to live with. That's what I'm thanking you for."

This left him awkwardly silent. Finally he asked, "Your crew? Have they quit the country?"

"They were hanging around Salish the last I heard."

"Round them up and bring them back," he said. "The trouble's done with. And another thing. If you want that box of valuables safe in the Salish bank again, I can take it along with me."

She said, "That box contains Confederate bonds. Worthless paper."

Confederate bonds! He let the laughter come.

She looked down. "I could have told Sherm that long ago, but perhaps he wouldn't have come back to the rimrock." She raised her eyes to him. "Now do you hate me?"

He looked at her; he saw in the slight quiver of her lips and the agony

in her eyes how anxiously she awaited his answer.

"All of us deal in Confederate bonds sometime." He smiled. "I must ride now."

She was near to crying. "Ride carefully, Holt."

He knew now what she had wanted of him, and he would want, always, as much from her: a solid understanding between them, an unblemished respect. He bent from the saddle and got his arm around her and drew her close and kissed her. Her lips clung hard to his for that brief moment.

He released her and separated the reins and evened them. He put the piebald toward the slant and rode upward, and at the crest he faced south and lifted the mare to a high gallop.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gun Song at Salish

RAIN came while he rode the Valley's openness, a soft and slanting rain that laid its peace upon the land. Brandon had then covered half the distance to camp. Soon the rain came hard enough to make him unlash his slicker from behind the saddle.

He rode across the last miles and presently saw the tents emerge out of the greyness. Vague movement there of those who had been left behind. One of these challenged Brandon; Jake Fargo had thought to leave a guard posted. Brandon spoke up and moved on in and found the cook.

Dismounting, Brandon said, "I could use something to eat. I've got to get on to town."

The cook swept his arm to the north and asked, "What's been happening up there?"

Brandon gave a brief report while the cook rustled grub for him. After he had eaten he went to his tent and tried to raise Salish by telegraph. Always a chance that the repairman had found the break and fixed it; but the line had no life.

Brandon came out of the tent, rose to saddle, and headed into the rain. After he rode out of the Three Sisters, the rain slackened so that he could see a stretch of country.

Shortly he made out a horseman ahead of him, slowly pacing the line. Drawing closer, Brandon recognized him as the fellow Fargo had sent in search of the break.

Brandon, overtaking him, said, "A man should be a fish on a day like this, Bruce."

Bruce shook his head. "Better an eagle so he could fly along the wire. Jake figured it might be a splice job. I've climbed twenty poles on the notion that the cut might have been made from one of them."

Brandon said, "You'd have kept climbing till you got tangled in your own whiskers. The cut was made between poles; the wire was reached from a tree. Champ McCoy told me where to find it."

Bruce's interest quickened. "Then McCoy was at Boxed T. You got him cooled down?"

Brandon said, "We're finished with him."

They rode on together, and by late afternoon Brandon judged they must be near the place McCoy had mentioned. Peering through the rain, he saw a clump of poplars and mountain ash into which the line ran, so large a growth that they hadn't detoured around it when they'd put the wire through here. Riding into these trees, both men dismounted.

Bruce carried a pair of lineman's climbers and also a portable instrument and a length of ground wire. Bruce donned the climbers and went up a tree. Presently he called down, "I think I see the break from here." He came down and moved to another tree. Soon he shouted, "I can reach it."

Brandon said, "When you get the line open, tell divisional to find Doc King and send him to Boxed T. Colonel Templeton needs him. Got that?"

"Sure," Bruce said.

Brandon mounted and rode out of the trees and continued on southward. Riding at a steady gait, he found the wagon road and followed it. Sometime later, he made out a buckboard careening toward him. When he got close enough to the wagon, he lifted his hand.

"No use wearing out your whip, Doc," Brandon called. "The colonel will keep till you get there."

Jonathan King sighed and relaxed on the seat. "The day operator was just going off shift when the message came through," he said, "I started as soon as he fetched it to me. What's happened?"

"Lucas hit at the ranch, and Templeton got a bullet along his ribs."

Brandon said. He saw the instant concern that leaped into King's eyes, and he added, "Ellen's all right."

King said, "I'll get on."

But Brandon didn't nudge the piebald. He asked bluntly, "Doc, did you ever declare yourself to her?" This startled King and so gave Brandon his answer.

"Both of them up there need you," Brandon said. "Sherm Lucas died today. From a gun in her hand. I'd walk into that house and go straight to her and take her in my arms."

King stared in astonishment, then shook his head. "First there was Lucas," he said. "Then you came here. She's talked about you a great deal. I got the notion that if you'd showed up first, she'd have given Lucas no time. It follows that you might be interested, too."

Brandon grinned wryly. "Maybe you haven't heard, Doc? Hell, I'm a married man."

He skirted the buckboard and rode on. He carried the remembrance of King's face, startled and perplexed but at last hopeful, until he saw the lights of Salish in early evening and rode into the street.

A few wayfarers shouldered against the rain. One of these, cutting across the street toward a restaurant, Brandon recognized. This was the Mountain Telegraph man who had been posted as guard in the hotel hallway outside Sam Whitcomb's door.

Brandon shouted, "Sam all right?" The man peered. "Sleeping, when I left him."

"He's alone?"

"I've only stepped out for a bite of

supper. I'll be going right back."

Brandon moved on to Mountain's headquarters. Dismounting, he tied the piebald before the building and crossed the walk to shoulder into the single room. Halliday was the only man here. Brandon felt a tightness in his belly then, a last reluctance.

Halliday hoisted his big body out of the swivel chair before the pigeonhole desk and crossed to the counter.

He said petulantly, "What's going on up in the valley, man? The line's been dead most of the day. Now that it's open, the only message we've got is a garbled one for King. I've nearly gone crazy waiting."

Brandon said flatly, "Quit it, Kirk."

For a moment Halliday's stare was startled, and then the surprise left him and he was wary, trying hard to read Brandon.

Brandon asked, "How long have you been working for Consolidated, Kirk? You fetched Jake Fargo whiskey, when every man in the organization knows Jake is a bottle-fighter. You were only roughed up a little, not really hurt, that day Lucas and McCoy snatched the pay roll and Gail from your buggy. Just what the hell did you expect to gain by working against Mountain?"

He watched Halliday closely; he expected him to show anger or make a try at bluffing. But Halliday merely shrugged.

"I'm a minority stockholder in Mountain," Halliday said. "Awhile back I had a chance to buy a considerable block of Consolidated stock. The stuff dropped, because Consolidated didn't look likely to get

Montana business away from Whitcomb. With the price low, opportunity readily suggested itself to me. The defeat of Mountain will mean a small loss on my stock with that outfit, but nothing compared to what I'll recoup when Consolidated stock goes up again. It's simply business, you see."

"You admit all this?" Brandon asked, surprised.

"A confession?" Halliday shook his head. "Sooner or later it will be obvious that I own Consolidated stock. There's no law against buying it. Nor in being acquainted with Champ McCoy, who has been in the same town with me nearly a month. Where's your proof that I took any orders from him?"

Brandon felt sick. "And still you'd have married Gail if I hadn't stopped you!"

Again Halliday shrugged. "A man has to look to his future. Sam Whitcomb has had his back to the wall before and managed to fight through. But with my holdings in Consolidated and a wife who will someday own most of Mountain, I'll be fixed no matter which way the wind blows."

Brandon's anger came in a great rush. He said, "You had a gun here the last time. I'm of a mind to make you try for it. Instead, I'm telling you to pack up and get out of Salish. I'll give you just one hour to be gone."

He turned away. He had his hand to the door when the Wheatstone began to clack out a message. S-A-L-I-S-H W-H-Y D-O-N-T Y-O-U R-E-S-P-O-N-D. The urgency of this brought him around, and he saw the dismay on Halliday's face. H-A-S

B-R-A-N-D-O-N A-R-R-I-V-E-D
T-E-L-L H-I-M M-C-C-O-Y E-S-
C-A-P-E-D T-E-M-P-L-E-T-O-N
R-A-N-C-H S-T-O-L-E H-O-R-S-E
A-N-D H-E-A-D-E-D S-O-U-T-H
A-C-K-N-O-W-L-E-D-G-E.

That was Jake Fargo at the key. That was Fargo desperately hurling the long lightning across the miles. And hearing the message, Brandon's streaking thought was of the time he'd spent at camp and in the clump of trees and on the roadside talking to King. Time enough for another to have reached Salish first and got himself a gun.

Instinctively he dropped to the floor behind the counter. He heard Halliday's voice rise wildly: "*McCoy!*" He heard the back door open and a gun blast, and knew now why Halliday had spoken so freely and where McCoy had waited, knowing that Brandon would come.

He got on his hands and knees and worked his gun out of its holster. He came up like a jack-in-the-box, firing. Halliday, his gun now in his hand, had fallen back a few paces until he stood against the desk. Just inside the rear door McCoy stood, his smile showing.

Halliday, lifting his gun, brought the barrel down to eye level; here was one trained to targets and thus careful about his shooting. Brandon snapped a shot toward him. Halliday jarred to the impact. His face showed a vast surprise, and then his legs gave way and he toppled over.

McCoy fired. Brandon felt the bullet tug at his sleeve. He shot at McCoy hastily—too hastily; he saw

the door frame splinter beside McCoy. Brandon put the heel of his gun hand to the counter and vaulted over. He came at McCoy in a rush, and saw fear cross McCoy's face. McCoy turned and bolted through the back door.

Brandon ran after him into the shadowy wagon yard with its piled supplies. No sign of McCoy.

Brandon paused in the sibilant rain, fearing ambush. He stood with his gun held ready, harking for some sound. He stood for a full minute and another. He wondered if McCoy had fled the yard in panic and was now losing himself in the town; then full realization struck him.

Whitcomb! Samalone—Sam, who'd been listed by McCoy this very morning as second when McCoy's chance came!

Running back into the office, Brandon vaulted the counter again. He lunged out through the front door, leaving it open. He ran along the street to the Ballard House and came bursting into its lobby. He took the stairs two at a time and caught his boot toe in an edge of loose carpet and went sprawling.

He got up and gained the hall and saw a lurching figure ahead of him. That figure swerved against Whitcomb's door and into the room. Brandon heard a gun speak.

He came into the room on McCoy's heels. Murk here, and the dim white shape of a bed, and the heavy smell of burned powder. Gunflame suddenly lighted the murk. Close, that one! Brandon made out the burly figure of McCoy in the flash and fired at Mc-

Coy and saw the big man dwindle before him. McCoy fell heavily.

Brandon, still tasting fear, cried out frantically, "Sam—?"

Whitcomb said, "Here." Brandon moved around to the far side of the bed, stepping over McCoy, and saw Whitcomb sprawled on the floor in his night-gown.

"I rolled out of bed when he hit the door," Whitcomb said. "That's how he missed me. He was so excited he blazed at the pillow. I think this damn' shoulder has torn open again."

Brandon said, "Let me help you." He cased his gun and got hold of Whitcomb and lifted him back onto the bed. "Doc King's gone up into the valley, Sam. Let's have a look at that bandage."

He fussed with the bandage; it showed a bright red stain. He got it firmly into place again.

"Hope that will do till King gets back. I'll send word to him." He looked at the shapelessness of McCoy and felt sick. "Your guard should be back from supper soon. He'll move McCoy out of here. There's another dead one at headquarters, Halliday."

"He was in with Consolidated?"

"He did some of their chores. It was himself he really worked for, and he let the chips fall where they might. Tonight he framed up McCoy's chance at me. He made the mistake of backing McCoy's gun with his own."

Whitcomb shook his head. "There was a rotten spot there, always. Sooner or later it was bound to show." He reflected for a moment. "Poor Gail!"

"I've got to get word to camp," Brandon said. "Will you be all right, Sam?"

"Fine," Whitcomb said. "Is Gail still up there?"

"Yes, Sam."

Whitcomb said, "I'd like her here, Holt. Especially if I've got to wait for this wound to heal again. Will you send for her in your message?"

"Sure," Brandon said. He looked at Whitcomb and smiled. "I'll take care of everything, Sam."

He walked out in the hall and came down the stairs. He saw the startled clerk at his desk. He said to the clerk, "There was some trouble upstairs; you heard the shots. It's all over now."

When he came out to the boardwalk, the rain felt good against his face. He walked along slowly, and it came to him that Mountain Telegraph had nearly made a clean sweep today, destroying all its obstacles but one. There was still terrain to be covered and time to be conquered; there was still the last of a race to be run.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Deadline

STRING wire, and you bed each night in a new place, and the distance from your last camp marks the miles you have covered that day. Time is something beyond price, something clutched at and cherished. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

Thus Brandon fought the last miles. A week had gone by since he had been in Salish; a second week sped after it. He had kept the telegraph working between camp and town and so knew that Sam Whitcomb was held to his bed by orders from Doc King; Sam had done himself in, with that frantic effort to escape McCoy's bullet.

Gail was with her father. Brandon had not seen her since the day he'd left her at Boxed T. Remembering Kirk Halliday dying against that pigeonhole desk he dreaded the hour when he must face her again.

July blazed down upon the mountain-side, and the crew fought heat as well as terrain. Belated rains came to lash the camp; the sky thundered and the lightning played, but between storms the beating sun turned the woods tinder-dry; and when the lightning came again, Brandon began to fear a forest fire.

He pushed the crew, but he was no longer remote from his men; that day at Boxed T had changed his attitude. These men, too, had a stake in the race if you shared your need with them and thus made it theirs.

The days dwindled away until there were only a last couple left. With less than forty-eight hours to go, Brandon called Jake Fargo to his tent after supper.

Fargo had resisted Warlock's nearby saloons, and the strain of this resistance showed on him. He gave Brandon a dour look and said, "We're beat, eh, Holt?"

Brandon hadn't shaved for five days. He supposed he looked as whiskery as Jake. He was silent for a

moment, thinking of all the delays, little and big, and wishing he had those accumulated hours before him. A day now could make the difference.

Jake said sharply, "I said we're beat, Holt."

"Maybe not," Brandon said. "To fulfill the contract, we've got to have a wire into Warlock, one that will carry a message. That's all. From here on, we'll string to trees and only use poles where we can't bridge without them. If I have to suspend the wire from the shoulder of one man to another, I'll get it into Warlock. After we've sent a completion message, we can finish up proper."

Fargo's whiskery face began to brighten. "It should bigawd work! You're right. The contract only calls for a workable wire."

Brandon said, "Tell the crew we're putting in another night shift."

They pushed on through that night and all the next day and into the next night. The wire was strung from branch to branch; the insulators were tacked to trees. Brandon worked feverishly, wishing this idea had come to him a few days earlier, wondering now if it had come too late. In the mountain meadows the crew set poles; and on the second night, outside Warlock, they came upon a length of sagging fence that had been put up when Warlock had known its first boom, years before. They strung the wire along this fence, and in the early morning came into Warlock.

The boom town sat cramped on a shelf on the mountainside, and they brought the wire along the twisted street and set up their equipment in a

deserted log cabin. The crew crowded into this little place. Brandon looked at the men around him.

"This should do it," he said.

Deadline today. Deadline, and the job nearly done. Brandon fumbled to open the line, having a last fear that somewhere a tree branch had failed to hold the wire and that it had fallen and broken. He felt lightheaded, yet infinitely concerned.

Fargo stood near him. Just a month and a day now since Jake had ridden back after that night attack on the camp, ridden back with a bullet-torn shoulder.

Brandon said, "You send the completion message, Jake."

"Hell," Fargo said, "you're the construction chief."

"And you're the man who's worked longest for Mountain Telegraph. Send it, Jake."

Fargo stepped up to the key. "Damn it, Holt, I'm rusty at this."

Brandon said, "You weren't so rusty the night you got drunk and ordered a pay roll in my name."

Fargo grinned. "I figured maybe you were still sore at me for that, Holt."

He touched the key. He tapped out the message. He waited for his acknowledgment and got it. Sam Whitcomb was at the other end; Sam had got himself out of bed, doctor or no, for the message that might come this day.

Brandon looked around at the crew. He expected them to cheer, but they didn't. Then he understood why, for he himself had only a feeling of deep

satisfaction that the job was done; it wasn't a thing you could voice. Finally a man tried it:

"Well, we sure as hell built ourselves a telegraph line, Holt."

Brandon said, "That we did," and knew that he stood close to his men; this was a shared and abiding thing. "Nothing more to do today, boys, but spend your pay. If there's a barber in camp, you'd better look him up. He could do a wholesale business with the bunch of you."

He shouldered his way among them and walked from the cabin and stood in the sunlight. Around him Warlock teemed; miners thronged the plank-ing. Here, too, were the gamblers and the girls and all the other flotsam washed up on the crest of the boom.

He walked along aimlessly at first. Remembering his own advice to his crew, he found a barber and got a haircut and a shave and paid the exorbitant price demanded for this service. Afterward he found a place to eat, and then he walked along the street again.

He felt empty in his idleness; he had been so long geared to the job that he was now lost. He wanted something to do. True, there were poles to be set, but that work could come later, with no rush about it.

He thought of Sam Whitcomb, unable to be up here and thus alone in his triumph save for the few Mountain Telegraph men who were in Salish. He knew that Sam would be expecting him to come and make a full report. He thought of Gail, and knew that the time had come when he

must at last face her. He got his piebald and sought out Jake Fargo.

He found the man before a plank-and-canvas saloon. In an hour's time, Fargo had succeeded in getting himself four hour's drunk. There was a telegraph man for you: he knew how to cut corners. Fargo stood swaying, a nearly empty quart bottle in his hand.

Brandon said, "I'm riding to Salish, Jake. Tomorrow morning, get the boys to putting in those poles."

Fargo nodded solemnly. "Been looking for you, Holt. Been saving the heel of this bottle for you. A drink together?"

"Sure," Brandon said, and reached for the bottle.

"Me first," said Fargo. "Oldesh man with Mountain." He lifted the bottle. "Besides, got a toast to make." He squinted owlishly at Brandon. "Knew Creighton. Worked for him on Western Union. He was a telegraph man, Holt. Worked for another man back in the 'forties, when I was hardly dry behind the ears. Irishman named O'Rielly. Spelled his name different from all the rest of the O'Reillys.

"Ain't nobody ever heard of O'Rielly these days, but he built eight thousand miles of telegraph line. Patched his breaks with old stovepipes, if nothing else was handy. He was a bigawd telegraph man, Holt. The breed's dying out, but it ain't dead yet. I drink to O'Rielly, and to Creighton. And I drink to you, Holt."

He held the bottle up to the light, measuring the contents, and put his

thumbnail at the halfway mark. He took a pull and made his inspection of what remained and handed the bottle to Brandon. Brandon finished it and tossed the empty away. Fargo looked at it forlornly, then brightened.

"More where that come from." He again squinted at Brandon. "You've changed, Holt. Every man in camp has noticed it. It comes to my mind that I first marked the change that day we all rode to Boxed T. I was a scared man when we found McCoy had slipped his rope and got a horse and got away. Scared for you."

Brandon said, "It's done with now. Another range, another job."

Fargo said, "Damned if we don't get us a new bottle and drink to that!"

"Not today, Jake, I've got to ride."

He stopped at the cook's wagon long enough to pick up some food, and rode out of Warlock. He made his camp that night near the foot of the slope and saw the lights of Boxed T winking distantly. He rode through all the next day, not pushing himself, and the second night he slept near the rocks where Lucas had once besieged him.

He hit Salish the following morning and heard the clang of a locomotive bell as he came into the street. This astonished him until he realized that time had meant progress for the railroad, too, and the steel had now come to Salish and thrust beyond the town.

At divisional headquarters, he made his inquiry and found that Whitcomb had moved from the Ballard House to his private car, which now

stood on a siding here in Salish. He got a restaurant meal then and another barbershop shave. He walked along the street and found it strangely sedate; the wild and boisterous ones were gone.

The windows of the Hogshead were boarded; probably the owner was now running that plank-and-canvas place where Jake Fargo had drunk. Salish was again settling to a slow stride; some day, Brandon supposed, it would laud its wild past, just as a satisfied middle-aged man brags of his wicked youth. Maybe it would indeed be a town to be proud of in the future.

These reflections made him think of Doc King, and he looked about for King as he walked along. He found his man on the seat of a buckboard a block farther. King had pulled up before a mercantile, and Ellen sat beside him. She spied Brandon and called his name.

He crossed over and pulled off his sombrero and said, "We finished the line."

Ellen said, "Yes, we heard." She was radiant. "Jonathan and I were married a week ago. We both wanted you present, but we knew you were racing toward your deadline."

King said, "I took your advice, Brandon." Gaiety surged through him and showed in his smile.

Brandon said, "I wish you both well." He looked to where a locomotive sent up smoke. "I must be getting along."

Ellen said, "Come to Boxed T whenever you can, Holt. My father's up and about now."

"Sure," he said.

He walked on to where the new track lay. He found the siding and Whitcomb's private car and set his fist to the door.

Whitcomb let him in, brightening at the sight of him. He silently escorted Brandon into the elegance of mahogany and red plush; and Whitcomb said, "Sit down, son." Brandon did so. A heap softer than a saddle, this chair.

Whitcomb said, "You've turned in another fine piece of work, Holt. You already know what it means to the future of Mountain. If there's anything you want, name it."

Brandon shook his head. "There's nothing I want from you, Sam, that you haven't already given me."

Whitcomb nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, Gail told me," he said. "The whole story. Including how after the marriage you told her about Texas and why you felt bound to me. No true friendship can be based on one man's owing another, Holt. I never counted you as bounden to me, son. It would have soured all the years I've known you."

"Yes," Brandon said, and he was remembering how he'd tried paying his debt to Boxed T in exact proportion, and what had nearly come of that. "I know it now. It was a thing that got crossways in my mind and stuck."

Whitcomb said, "The irony of it is that young Buck Elliot got pardoned years ago. By the President. I remember reading about it in the papers. I supposed that I'd told you at the time, but perhaps I was in Chicago and you

were in the field. It's all so long ago and far away."

"Yes," Brandon said. "Dead and done with. But I'm glad for Buck."

He heard the door to the sleeping-quarters open, and Gail stood there. She came toward him. Her face showed Sam's new calmness and some of Sam's wisdom and understanding, but still this was for Brandon a bad moment. He had never known what he would say when the time came, and so the words were unbidden.

"I just want to say this, Gail. First I gave Halliday a chance to leave town. In what happened next, I had no choice."

He heard another door open and shut, and this startled him. Sam had left the car. Brandon felt as though a prop had been taken away from him; he felt trapped and uncertain.

Gail said in a low voice, "Kirk was old enough to be interesting. He knew the words a girl wants to hear. My father has since pointed out that the rotten spot was always in him. It seems to me, Holt, that he picked his own path." Her face began to break. "And it seems to me that I've been an utter fool."

Confederate bonds again. What frailty made each person sometime in his life pin his faith on a worthless thing? He himself had done this for seventeen years in his own blind way.

"It doesn't need to matter, Gail Unless you let it."

She shook her head. "It's not only that I picked the wrong man, but I was so wilful about it, Dad had picked another man for me and told me so.

So I got obstinate. If only he had let me find you for myself, it might have been different from the very first."

"Me—?"

"Who else would my father have picked?"

This left him with nothing to say; he had only the sharp knowledge that for him she was the woman. He wondered when he'd first come to love her—in this car, or on the trail down from Hashknife's cabin, or in the wagon yard behind divisional headquarters when he'd stopped her and Halliday? He felt awkward, and his hands seemed to be in his way.

Finally he said, "I'm only sorry I had to use a gun at the wedding. For my part, I'd like the marriage to stand But if you wish, it can be annulled."

"Yes," she said. "That's what the preacher's wife whispered to me, just as you suspected. But she also whispered something else. She said that any man who would risk force to make the girl marry him must want the girl mightily. She didn't understand that it was your loyalty to Sam Whitcomb that was moving you that day. But I think I would like to own a part of that loyalty, Holt. I think I would like to have it forever sheltering me."

He said, "Then you mean—?"

She looked up at him; she smiled. "I remember riding down the slope to Boxed T with Mountain's crew behind me. I remember seeing you on the porch with Ellen and knowing you were alive and safe. And I remember not wanting my face to show what I felt in that moment. A last wilfulness, Holt."

He said, "It isn't much of a life I can offer you."

She said, "I'm Sam Whitcomb's daughter, so I shan't feel strange in a construction camp. You'll find me much like him in many ways, Holt, sometimes to your sorrow." She moved closer to him. "There is no more I can tell you, no more I can offer."

Now she was within the reach of his hands, and he drew her to him. Her

lips were warmer than they had been on their wedding day. He wondered what words to say, what pledge to make, but he remembered the wisdom of Sam Whitcomb that he himself had taken so long to learn.

This must not be a bounden thing; this must hold no obligation but the heart's. He pressed her close and was a grateful man.

THE END

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To Pay the Score

A NOVELETTE

By L. L. FOREMAN



*Among the men who rode the owlhoot trail,
a debt was not a thing to be ignored.*

CHAPTER ONE

Road Agent

THAT DAY, Jim Naylor rode into Torreon from his little hill ranch with nothing more on his mind than the buying of some coffee and tobacco. Along the north end of Torreon's wide main street he sighted the well-dressed figure of Buster Jack Breck and, because that was not us-

ual, Jim drew aside and legged off his saddle and while closely examining his horse's forefeet he muttered:

"Anything wrong, Jack?"

It was like that in Torreon, a trail town. Matters drifted along, quiet and peaceful. Then something broke out of order, and usually meant violence coming up. The casual talk of idling men was bitten off. Signs proclaimed beware.

Buster Jack Breck finished lighting

I cigar, then murmured to Jim Naylor, "It's all right, Jim. I've had a falling out with Ringo Varney. I've closed the place. Ringo says he'll be in to see me. I'm waitin' for him."

"Need any help, Jack?"

"No, thanks, Jim. I can handle Ringo. You drift along."

"Okay."

Buster Jack Breck was, in this wild trail town of tough characters, a feared man. He had that forcefulness in his eyes, in his unhurried stride. Buster Jack was a badman, the ruler of Torreon. He owned and personally operated Breck's Ranch, two miles south of town—a roadhouse, a notorious dive.

"It's all right, Jim," he murmured. He ranged a rapid, stiff inspection up and down the street and off to the trail dangling south. "It's all right, Jim. This isn't my day, don't you worry."

But it was his day. Perhaps his enormous self-confidence hid the presentiment from him. He was a squarely built man with a blunt face, whose tawny hair now, in his late forties, was streaked with gray.

He paced the main street of Torreon that night, supremely arrogant, puffing a cigar. And Ringo Varney up on the flat roof of the Mercantile said, "Hello, Buster!" and shot him in the chest.

Buster rolled over in the dirt of the street and laid a shot at Ringo which got him right in the face. They were both dead when the people ran out.

Jim Naylor had stayed in town, another unusual thing. He got to Buster Jack first and said, "How's it, Jack?"

Buster Jack turned over on his back. "Jim, I'm through. The damn' fool

got me. Remember what I told you, *amigo*—please, Jim!"

Jim said, "It's a promise." Before the crowd closed in he found Buster Jack's heavy right hand and gripped it—the first time in more than five years—and he got up and forced himself to remark without sentiment while moving off, "They didn't waste any shots."

The last time he had shaken hands with Buster Jack, it was just south of Torreon, when they pulled in for a smoke and a brief powwow beside the cattle trail. Their friendship dated back to a forgotten range war in Nevada, after which they stuck together for a couple of years—aslant down through Arizona into Old Mexico and a bad bobble there.

Buster Jack, with a bullet in his knee, had dragged Jim Naylor out of the jackpot, stole a rig, got him back over the border, and doctored Jim and himself in a tiny adobe village in Hidalgo County, New Mexico. Then up and across New Mexico and finally into the Texas Panhandle. The wild, crimson years. Gambling, fighting, their guns for hire; living on wits and nerve.

Buster Jack Breck was a good man—and a bad one. Twice Jim's age, he had a marked past that no man could ever live down; and he didn't try. They made money, yet he was generally broke. It was a mystery what he did with it. He would scheme, take on insane risks, cheat and rob and shoot, for a hundred dollars—and in two days be borrowing from Jim the price of a drink and a cigar.

Jim knew that Buster Jack was too tough and getting tougher right along. So, in sight of Torreon, he said—not

without regret—"Jack, I think I've had enough. I'm going to work."

Although Jack was studying a roadhouse off the trail with a thoughtfully predatory eye, he understood instantly.

"Sure," he responded. "Me too. This damn knee—it don't like a saddle no more. You push on. But let's keep in touch, kid. I've had so many friends who—"

He rolled his solid shoulders. "They're mostly dead now," he mentioned. Then he explained why he was always broke. But there was money on this trail, and he guessed he'd get his share of it. "If you ever need me, sing out. An' if I need you—"

"I'll be there, Jack."

"I know you will. *Adios!*"

That was all. They shook hands. Buster Jack turned off to the roadhouse. Jim rode on into Torreon.

Jim had some money. He bought a little ten-cow tumbledown outfit—T 2 brand—in the foothills of the Mormon Mountains west of the rich West Benches. He rebuilt the house, took riding jobs in summer, traded and worked for a few more cows, became known as a taciturn hermit, and was generally regarded as able to take care of himself.

He was big and muscular, a dark, hard-working man who cloaked his loneliness behind a blank, remote stare. Nobody bothered him.

Within a year Buster Jack owned that roadhouse. He named it Breck's Ranch and it became the most notorious place on the trail. In a year or two it was whispered that he was in with the Ringo Varney bunch—arranging markets for the sale of cattle that would not stand any close brand in-

spection; selling horses without bills of sale; caching loot in his safe. He spread out and gained control of that part of Torreon that surged out of slumber after sundown.

He was a force. The marshal forefingered the brim of his hat to him. Garbed in fine black broadcloth and white linen, Buster Jack Breck strode the town and nobody was his superior. He could break anybody.

Whenever he and Jim chanced to meet, by their unspoken agreement they exchanged curt nods. For Buster Jack was the outlaw in charge, and Jim was a struggling and fairly respectable cowman. Their glances, meeting, gave and received the secret salute of old friendship, but nobody else ever saw it.

And now Buster Jack was dead, and Ringo Varney was dead. Jim Naylor legged aboard his horse and set out somberly for his little outfit in the foothills. Folks would say that Jack had got what was coming to him—the proper finish for a notorious old gunslinger who had bulled and toughed his way into clover. They didn't know about the running fight to the border, the desperate loyalty of the man. His clever, patient, gentle doctoring of a friend.

There was a score to pay there. . . .

Having raised its billowing banners of dust on the fast downhill sweep, the stagecoach toiled the upgrade, six horses tugging, the driver occasionally cracking his whip. The shotgun messenger sat rocking boredly, arms folded.

Unhurriedly, Jim Naylor adjusted the blue bandanna up to his eyes and

fastened the canvas slicker to his chin. He drew his worn-barreled gun from its smooth holster. Behind him a man in a pink flannel shirt and light tan California pants, lying in a patch of rabbit brush, moaned softly.

Jim Naylor listened and concluded that the moan was only an unconscious complaint. He had gun-clouted the man too soundly for him to be coming to his senses already.

The slicker didn't fit. Too tight and short for his size. But it would do. Rain wouldn't come for four months yet, if then, but a slicker was adequate for other uses. He yanked down the brim of his hat and waited.

The stagecoach came steadily on. Wheels, hoofs, strained leather thorough braces, all sent forward their individual sounds. The rounded Concord coach swayed easily in the ruts.

At the top of the grade the driver leaned back on the lines and booted the brake, to give the team a breather before the spanking two-mile run into Torreon.

Jim Naylor said, walking out, "Put 'em up an' let's not have any foolishness, huh?"

The shotgun messenger unfolded his arms and regarded the tall man in slicker and mask. He said something to the driver and raised his hands.

The driver sighed and said angrily, "I ain't lettin' the lines go, that downhill ahead! Use sense, man!"

The flare of defiance inspired the shotgun messenger to say to Jim, "You've hit a dry haul. There ain't much in the box."

Jim said, "Never mind the box." To the driver he said, "Tell your fares to come out, please."

"I only got one. A young lady."

"Tell her to come out!"

The driver looked carefully at the gun. He shouted, "Out, ma'am—he wants you out!"

"Who?"

The answering voice was soft and quiet, but that meant nothing. The most whale-boned spinsters could speak like that. The side door of the Concord coach swung open. A girl stepped out.

In spite of her long dust cloak and full-skirted dress, she gave an immediate impression of lithe young ease of movement, and her large gray-green eyes and tawny hair were striking enough to catch attention anywhere.

She glanced incuriously at Jim Naylor, made to turn to the driver, then looked again. Noting then the mask, the slicker, the gun, she exclaimed, "Well!" in the same soft, untroubled voice.

It was oddly disturbing, her air of possessing some trusted talisman guarding her from harm. Anger—defiance—hysterics—could be expected and coped with after a fashion. But here was a girl who, like a child that had never known harshness, simply gazed unafraid at an armed and masked road agent and assumed as a matter of course that he could be trusted not to hurt her; she was either very brave or very ignorantly foolish.

Jim Naylor said to the driver, "All right—roll on!"

The driver stared, and started a protest. For this was the Texas Panhandle, the Southwest. You could kill a man here and stand a fair shake of getting away with it, but even a small insult to a woman stood as an unforgivable crime. The authority of

the pointing gun silenced him. His thoughts could be read on his face: race to Torreon and stir a posse out, quick.

He kicked off the brake and hit the team. The coach careened on over the tip of the hill, the open door flapping.

The girl watched it go, and turned to Jim Naylor. "My trunk?"

Her quiet self-possession communicated itself to him. He snapped thumb and forefinger.

"I forgot. Sorry, Miss Breck. I'll get it and ship it to you later. You won't be here long."

"So you know my name?" Her large eyes were interested.

He unfastened the tight slicker and holstered his gun, self-consciously. "I couldn't be mistaken. I knew your father."

Her eyes brightened. "You did? I can't remember him. I was only two years old when he took me to St. Louis and put me in the care of Mom and Pop Campbell. All I know of him is from his letters."

She added musingly, "He wrote to me about his ranch, about his work with the cattle and how it left him so little time for his church and civic work. He must have been a very fine man."

It was amazing. They could have been a man and a girl conversing after proper introduction. The girl set the keynote of normalcy. She asked, "Your name is—?"

"Jim," he said sparsely. He tugged the knotted bandanna down below his chin, revealing his dark and somewhat saturnine face. "This way, please, Elizabeth—Miss Breck, I mean."

"You even know my first name?"

She walked alongside him into the brush.

"Yeah. Your father told me." He steered her clear of the senseless man sprawled in the rabbit brush. "Yeah, your father was a fine man. I thought the world of him."

The buckboard stood waiting, his saddled horse rein-tied to the rear where he had left it after knocking out the man in the pink shirt. He handed Elizabeth Breck up into the off side and walked around the team and climbed into the driver's seat. She seemed to know then that something was wrong.

She asked, "Where are we going—er—Mr. Jim?"

An old, half-forgotten sense of humor flooded up, and he told her, "To my place, Lizzy." He cracked the whip over the team and the buckboard lurched forward.

"Are you—kidnaping me, Mr. Jim?" she asked.

He sent the buckboard bounding westerly toward the foothills of the Mormons.

"Why, I guess I am," he responded after considering it. "Don't jump out, Liz. You'd get hurt. I wouldn't have you hurt for the world."

CHAPTER TWO

Triggerman of Torreon

JIM'S cabin was large, built of logs and chinked with adobe. High windows for protection—he knew the dangers of small-time ranching in a land dominated by powerful cattle syndicates and absentee owners of a million acres of so-called free grass.

Navajo rugs lent bright color and the great rough fireplace demanded four-foot logs. This was a man's house. No curtains, the table bare, blown sand fanning out unswept from the crack under the door. The grandly careless home of a bachelor and hermit who refused to be bothered by dust and dirt and skimped housekeeping. Obviously, no woman was here.

It stood on a hill.

Elizabeth Breck, entering ahead of Jim Naylor, looked around with a woman's glance and said, "You have a nice house, but it needs cleaning. Where is your broom and mop?"

He replied curtly, "I didn't bring you here to clean up my mess. You won't be here long, I hope. Make yourself comfortable."

Leaving her, he went on out and attended to the horses. The buckboard posed a problem, for he had taken it from Dutch Wassoon—the man he knocked out. But the risk of its presence had to be borne until he could take it off somewhere and get rid of it. He turned the team into the corral along with his own horse for the time being.

When he returned, Elizabeth Breck was finishing sweeping out the sand. He passed her without a word, again feeling that sense of disturbance. She certainly was the daughter of Buster Jack—who had generally gained his own way and never got excited. She had the same trait of reacting contrary to any line of predictable behavior.

This affair, Jim mused, was likely to prove even more difficult than he had anticipated. How did you go about forcing obedience from a girl

who didn't seem to know the meaning of fear?

He seated himself at the table with pen and ink and a sheet of paper, and began writing slowly, carefully, in print-form capitals. By the time he finished, Elizabeth was busy in the kitchen. She had a fire lighted in the old Home Comfort stove and was preparing a pot of coffee.

Jim scratched his head, glancing from her to the paper, and asked finally, "Uh—of course you know your father left you everything he had. Some cash, an' the Breck Ranch."

She nodded, measuring coffee into the pot, her back toward him. "Oh, yes. I've written several times to Judge Greenlee about it—he's the executor. His replies were very vague and always mentioned legal entanglements. So at last I wrote that I had decided to come and stay at the ranch, and—here I am. What's your last name?"

"Naylor," he answered automatically, then frowned. "I guess you want to sell the ranch an' start back home soon's possible, don't you?"

She fitted the lid on the coffeepot, slid the pot onto the stove, and bent down and adjusted the damper.

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "From what my dad wrote to me in his letters, it's a beautiful place. And profitable. He was always sending me money. Couldn't I live there and learn how to manage it?"

Jim thought momentarily of Breck's Ranch—that notorious roadhouse, tough hangout for gamblers, loose women, wolf-eyed members of the wild bunch, and shaggy trail riders in for a fast frolic and a fight.

"No," he said with finality, "you couldn't!"

That unlovely, sinister deadfall, reeking of sin, now looted and abandoned, a rotting monument to Buster Jack Breck's worst side. An eyesore. The sorry relic of Jack's ambition to support his far-off daughter in fine style. That Jack. That two-natured man. Loyal friend, devoted father—badman and killer and unscrupulous swindler.

The girl turned from the stove to look up into Jim's face. "I took a business course in school. Ranching is a business, isn't it?"

"In a way," he conceded guardedly. She must never be allowed to learn that her father was not the respected, upright rancher she believed he had been. Jack had asked that, over five years ago in the parting talk beside the trail, and the promise had been given in payment of a tall score.

"But bookkeeping," Jim told Elizabeth, "isn't all there is to runnin' a ranch. You got to deal with critters—not just figures. And," he added, "some critters just can't be figured. Takes a lot of experience."

"I can learn, can't I?"

"No. I wouldn't want you to." An impatience got into him. He said crisply, shoving the paper at her, "This is a bill o' sale on the Breck Ranch, which you own. I propose to sell it tonight. Sign there at the bottom!"

She took the paper and read it. She shook her head. "But I don't think I want to. Besides, those legal entablements that Judge Greenlee wrote about—"

"Leave those entanglements to me," he interrupted. "I'll kick the

kinks out! Greenlee's only a J.P.—a justice of the peace—with no more *sabe* of the law than I've got. He don't count. He was okay till you father died. Now—"

He bit that off. Greenlee, a little man, had bowed to Buster Jack while Jack was king of Torreon. Now Jack was gone. Greenlee now was bowing to another king. This was a country where the law was spread thin. And the Cherokee Strip—Indian land—lay only forty miles north. A dissatisfied man could make his run up to the Strip, and from there swoop down in a bitter foray against whatever he considered an injustice. The living had power in whatever circumstances. The dead were dead, powerless.

"Sign you name!" Jim commanded.

She studied him gravely. He was a big man, lean and hard, his wide shoulders on a level with the top of her head. His dark face held a look of strength and a stubborn tenacity, a grimness super-imposed on long-neglected creases of humor about his flat lips. He was a man who had known easy laughter once, and had forgotten it in the lonely, hard-pushed life that he had taken to himself. A man well on the way to becoming a hermit.

"Where is your pen?" she inquired.

Her acquiescence floored him. He had expected a storm of revolt. Here again was that unpredictable behavior. This girl simply could not be figured out beforehand; she was too much like old Buster Jack. The calm compliance with circumstances—and the razor-edged dart drawn ready behind the deceptively submissive facade.

Suspiciously, he gestured to the table. She sat down, dipped the pen

in the ink, and signed the paper without any hesitation. It was a clear signature, strong and bold.

"Thank you," said Jim. He folded the sheet and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "I'll get the coffee."

"It's not ready yet," she remarked mildly, licking and rubbing an ink stain from her second finger. "And we should eat something with it. I'm hungry—aren't you? Where's the cooler?"

"Outside, left o' the door."

He watched her go out of the kitchen door and turn left and heard her raid the cooler. She sure had a way of making herself at home.

While eating together, he told her politely, "I've got to go to Torreon tonight. Do I have to lock you in here while I'm gone? You could break out, o' course. But you'd get lost in the dark, y'know."

She thought about it, and shook her head. Swallowing a mouthful of beef and bread, she sipped coffee and said, "I think I'd better stay here till you get back. No—don't lock mein. I wouldn't like that, Jim Naylor."

"Okay," he said. And that stood for an affirmation of thanks to her good sense as well as a prayer to his own conscience.

She was too pretty a girl, too altogether attractive, to go roaming loose and alone in the vicinity of tough Torreon. She was safe here on this little hill ranch, for a while. For a few hours, anyhow.

In Torreon the largest single building was Randemann's Rest, occupying the corner of Kearney Street where it bent sharply to cross the old toll bridge over Kearney River. The barroom took up only part of the

building; there was also the hotel on one side with the dance hall and gambling-room on the downstairs floor, and on the other side a store with an office above it.

All being under one roof, the whole place was simply called "Randemann's." The store had become the city hall and police court, presided over by Justice of the Peace Greenlee. The office above it was used by Tal Randemann as his business headquarters, he having many irons in the fire besides his saloon and hotel trade.

After ground-reining his horse at the saloon hitchrack, Jim Naylor built a cigarette slowly, moving away from the light of the windows while taking note of the brands of racked horses. The brands informed him that many of the cattlemen from West Benches and outlying parts had ridden in tonight.

Word had gone out, then, that the stage had been stuck up today. It took no deep perception to sense the restless mood of the town. A girl had been stolen, kidnaped. Of all the committed crimes in and around Torreon, this was the unforgivable one, condemned by men who still clung to the rigid code of chivalry toward women. This was Texas.

The townsmen, and the dollar-hungry, cynical strangers from everywhere, might regard the abuse of a woman as just another offense against the Law, in much the same category as beating and robbing a man. The ranchers knew better; they went by a different set of standards.

Some light escaped from the shaded windows of Randemann's office. Jim crushed out his cigarette, sent a rapid look all around, and softly climbed

the narrow staircase between the one-time store and the saloon.

Reaching the small landing at the top, he unashamedly put an ear to the office door. Somebody was talking. He recognized Randemann's distinctive drawl at once.

"... and it won't do, I tell you!" Randemann was saying. "Ringo never would've let a slip-up like this—"

"Dammit, don't ride me!" broke in a second voice—and Jim narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. This was Beau Laban. He had been Ringo Varney's *segundo*. After Ringo's death, Laban had stepped up into leadership of the rough bunch.

It followed an old unchanging pattern. Buster Jack had played along with Ringo Varney, until the inevitable falling out, the fatal fight. Laban now filled Varney's boots, and Randemann was taking Buster Jack's place.

Any organized wild bunch, preying on the rich traffic of the trail, needed a strong inside man for information, brains and guidance, a dependable source of supplies, a safe cache—a hundred necessary services. In time it was he who gave the orders. The *jefe* of the gang resented that, and sooner or later came the quarrel. The thieves fell out.

An old, old pattern. Jim Naylor knew it by heart.

Beau Laban said angrily, "Look, Tal! Dutch Wassoon sticks up the stage an' takes the girl. I'm waitin' there at the camp on Soldier Hat. He don't show up as arranged. Well? I can't figure it. Don't ride me! You picked him for the job, di'n'cha?"

There was a silence. Presently Ran-

demann said in a less hectoring tone, "Dutch must've hit a bobble somewhere. Damn! Greenlee's jumpy. I can't trust him. Nor Goulard."

"Leave 'em to me!"

"The hell! You can't kill the J.P. and the town marshal! Gahdam cattle crowd's already on the prod. Shooting's not the answer to this. You've prowled too long in the brush!"

"Well?" Laban dragged out.

"Find where Dutch has taken the girl!" responded Randemann. "I'll take her in hand. We'll take credit for saving her from the—uh—lawless lobos who . . ." His voice fell to a murmur.

Jim Naylor tugged his bandanna up over his nose. He slid his gun out in his right hand and cocked the hammer full, and with his left hand he found and gentled the doorknob. At the click he thrust the door inward swiftly and stepped in, saying:

"Keep your hands clean or I'll shoot!"

They were caught unprepared at the rolltop desk—Tal Randemann standing, Beau Laban spread-legged in a straight-back chair. Laban jerked around, his right hand immediately cut to his thigh and smacking a gun butt.

His wide, blunt face held stark challenge, nothing else. He had, as Randemann said, prowled too long in the brush. He was more than half animal.

Tal Randemann simply stood still. Fond of presenting himself as a gentleman from Virginia, he had built up a splendid pose—drawl and dress and manners—more natural to him now than the twang of Pennsylvania Dutch, the flashy shine of a Mississi-

ppi gambler, the edged furtiveness of a deserter who had spread the blanket for three-card-monte behind the Confederate lines.

Tal had picked up courtesy somewhere along the ragged line, and he said to Jim with exquisite politeness, "Won't yo' sit down, suh? Youah name?"

Jim let his cocked gun linger on him, before aiming it back at Beau Laban. He heeled the door shut behind him.

"I'll stand, thanks. *You* sit down—an' lay your hands on the desk where I can see 'em! Beau, lift your hand off that gun, will you? Lift 'em both! That's fine!"

This was a bad jackpot. Laban could whip out a gun and shoot straight between one second and the next. Tal Randemann, of course, had a derringer nestled in every pocket and one up each sleeve. Their living depended upon swift violence in the pinch.

Studying the eyes above the masking bandanna, Randemann remarked, "I don't think I know you, suh." And Laban, staring pinchedly, grunted.

"Not ne'ssary," Jim assured them, keeping his gun up. "Mr. Randemann, you've taken over an' looted Breck's Ranch. I give you the opportunity now to buy it, an' make an honest man of yourself—as well as Judge Greenlee an' Marshal Goulard, those two poor pups you've whipped into line!"

He drew the folded paper from his shirt pocket, using his left hand, and tossed it on the desk. "Read that an' pay up!"

With his long white fingers Tal Randemann spread out the sheet of paper.

He perused it carefully, without any change of expression.

Flicking it along the desk for Laban to read, he raised his aquiline face to Jim Naylor and raked him with a long, considering inspection. A tiny outbreak of inner rage rippled up his cheeks, making the high cheekbones momentarily more prominent. But it was soon controlled, leaving him as impassively unruffled on the surface as before.

Beau Laban, of a different temperament, burst out, "Hell, what's this? A fake bill o' sale!"

"No," Randemann murmured. "It's not a fake, Beau. That's the genuine signature of Breck's daughter."

"You sure should know," said Jim, "You saw it on her letters to Greenlee. You put the screws on Greenlee an' made him stall her off while you looted her property."

He nodded at the safe behind Randemann. "I think that was Buster Jack's strongbox. I'm wonderin' how much you found in it, after you got the keys from Greenlee. Jack shied away from banks. So do you. Too unhandy, if you ever had to hightail out o' the country in a hurry!"

He grimaced briefly under his mask, remembering Buster Jack's practical maxims on how to conduct a lawless life.

"From your knowledge of things, suh, I judge you to be a local man," Randemann observed. And to Laban: "Any idea who he is?"

A sultry glow swallowed Laban's eyes. He shook his head slightly. "Seems like I should, but I don't place him." Then he exclaimed, "How'd he get her signature?"

Randemann shrugged negatively.

He drew the paper back and read it through again. Looking up from it to Jim, he asked in a tone of thin contempt, "What do you expect me to pay for this two-cent title to a busted road-house?"

Jim had his answer ready. He gave it straight. "I want whatever money there is in Buster Jack Breck's safe! I want it all an' I want it now!"

The gall of it shook Randemann's composure, and brought from Laban a whistling oath. Jim held them closely covered.

He said to Randemann, "Open that safe or I'll kill you, tinhorn!"

Randemann believed him, but he moved with an exaggerated slowness, playing for time. Some horsemen drummed into Kearney Street, and their sounds traveled forward and bounced echoes from the false-fronts at the bend.

Randemann looked at Laban, and turned to the safe. It had three locks. He fitted each key as carefully as a surgeon making a delicate incision.

The riders raised noise below, crowding to the hitchracks, creaking the saddles in dismounting, ringing their spurs and stamping the board-walk.

Randemann slowly pulled open the heavy door of the safe, saying, "There you are—come and get it."

"Haul out that cash bag," Jim said, "an' lay it on the desk an' pick up that bill o' sale. This is a business transaction."

"Ah, yes, of course," Randemann murmured, and drew it out. It was a leather satchel, heavy, and it thumped a good satisfying sound on the desk. Laban stared at it and uttered a growl of protest.

Jim picked it up in his left hand, and backed to the door. And then came boots banging the stairs, and a voice calling up:

"Hey, Tal—we found Dutch! Here he is!"

He whirled to the door, his gun in one hand, the cash-laden satchel in the other. This, then, was what Tal Randemann had been banking on—that the incoming riders were men of Laban's bunch.

Randemann smiled and Laban leaned forward slightly, and they watched Jim, much as they might have regarded a treed wildcat that stood no chance whatever of escape.

"I think you better give up," Randemann murmured.

"Sing out to 'em not to come in here!" Jim commanded.

The glare in his eyes was turbulent and rough. But the two men stayed mute. The authority of his gun had abruptly shrunken, for to shoot now could serve him nothing, and his time was running out. The spurred boots of several men pounded up the stairs.

That same voice called again, "We found Dutch Wassoon! Damn these dark stairs—give us a light!"

CHAPTER THREE

When the Trail Runs Out

THE door burst open. A bearded man took a plunging stride into the office and pulled up short, blinking his pinched eyes at the light, his large bulk blocking the men behind him. He was Ben Mallon, half-brother to Laban.

He picked out Laban and said to

him angrily, "Dammit, Beau, why didn't you open the door an' give us a light? Feller could break his neck—"

Jim swung the heavy satchel. Ben Mallon saw it coming, but too late. It knocked his hand aside and slammed him full in the whiskers, and backward he went the way he had come, down the stairs.

Jim dived after him, while Beau Laban's gun punched blaring explosions, interspersed by short, sharp reports of a pair of Randemann's derringers.

"Get that duck, Ben!" Laban yelled. "Get 'im! He's got the money!"

That didn't do much good. Ben Mallon's face was a smear and his senses weren't operating too well. The staircase was a tunnel of violent confusion, men piling into one another and all tumbling to a chaotic tangle at the bottom. Ben Mallon was a weighty and unexpected load flung at them, and Jim's dive completed the disaster. It sounded like forty horses hitting a fence.

Jim swam the choked tide of arms and legs, flailing out with gun and satchel. He struck the boardwalk with his chin, and reared up. There was too much hurry for him to pick his own horse from the crowded hitchrack. He sprang to the nearest.

Kearney Street was filling with people attracted out by the noisy ruckus. Some would stay neutral. Others would not. The nearest horse was held by one of the Laban bunch—one who had not yet located a spot for it at the crowded hitchracks.

Jim hit that man down and took the horse. He forked aboard and rode out of Torreon on the high lope, his

scraped chin bleeding, knowing they would see his racked horse and by it would identify him. The horse bore his brand, the proud little poverty-stricken T 2. A one-man outfit, and the man a kind of tough hermit.

He rode up to his T 2 cabin and legged down from the saddle, and, opening the cabin door, looked straight into the muzzle of a single-shot .44 pistol. Elizabeth Breck held it.

Was it this, he wondered, that had sustained her? A little gun hidden somewhere in her dress? No, her courage and calm poise were founded on the possession of something more spirit-lifting than a slug of lead and a charge of powder.

There she stood, dainty and self-possessed, her tawny head erect, her large gray-green eyes regarding him with quiet thoughtfulness. Even the lethal little pistol was held in a curiously casual manner, like a pointing finger mutely requesting a moment of his time.

He dropped the leather satchel to the floor. Again it gave out the unmistakable clank of hard gold and rustle of banknotes.

He said consideringly, "I could jump you, an' take my chances on that shooter—if you were a man. It'd be rough. You being who you are, I hardly know what to do, 'cept try to talk you out o' this."

She lowered her gaze to the satchel. "Jim Naylor, you had me sign a bill of sale to the ranch. Evidently you've sold it, and there's the money. Can you talk yourself out of that?"

He shook his head. "I did that. This is your money. But you won't

keep it by holding that gun on me."

He heeled around to the door, saying, "Don't pull that trigger, Elizabeth! I've got to team up that buckboard. I've got to get you started back home. There isn't much time. A kind o' posse will be dusting up around here for me pretty soon."

She didn't shoot. Instead, she tucked the pistol away and ran after him. "I'll help."

"Get that sack an' shut the door," he told her. "I'll get you up to the Glaston division. You take the first stage there up to the railhead, an' the first train north. That sack's your baggage—hang onto it!"

He caught out the team from the corral, backed them up to the buckboard, hurriedly threw on and buckled the light harness.

Elizabeth called to him, "Somebody coming!"

He straightened out the lines, and raised his head to listen. Somebody? Heavying thunder blared the approach of many riders beating up from the valley road.

"Jump in!" he said.

For a moment, seated and holding the lines, she beside him on his left, he listened further and pictured the desperate pattern and made his rapid calculations.

The riders from Torreon now had sight of the lighted cabin, certainly. They would circle it, surround it in a minute, open fire and charge in; would discover it empty and would search out. Nothing was to be gained by waiting and lying low. They could soon locate the buckboard.

Jim whispered, "We're cut off from Glaston. We'll take the old wagon trace over the Mormons. It's a heck

of a road. But there's the Ranger camp at Dalhart an' we might make it—if the Lord's on our side!"

"Dalhart?" she murmured. "Isn't that where they say no outlaws live?"

"Outlaws don't get through Dalhart," Jim agreed. "I've known a few who tried it."

He couldn't hope to get through Dalhart, himself. There were the yellowing old dodger bills, and the keenly trained, utterly passionless eyesight and memory of the Rangers. He lashed the team to a bolting start.

"Hang on tight! It's a bad road—an' it'll get worse up the mountains before it gets better!"

As he expected, the Torreon riders caught the sound of the wheels, and shouted and came clattering in pursuit. The old wagon trace scored the foothills and meandered upward dizzily to the tall mountain slopes. He hit the team on, letting the buckboard bounce in the deep washout ruts.

The riders skylined themselves recklessly and took to the high shoulders; they could make faster time than he could.

He thrust the lines into Elizabeth's hands, and squirmed on the seat and laid two shots at the skylined pursuers. One of them tumbled and at once the others quit the ridge and plunged into the darkness.

Jim fired down the trail. He heard his bullet smack a rock and go screaming off on a ricochet. The hoofbeats of the riders grew confused.

Tal Randemann shouted, "You piddling hairpins—get him!" And after that Laban, cursingly extolling his bad bunch: "Get 'im, hell blast you!"

It came as an anticlimax to hear Marshal Goulard pipe up earnestly, "Naylor! Pull in an' surrender—you hear? This is the law!"

So Goulard was in on the hunt, Jim thought pinchedly. It showed the shoddy depth to which Goulard had been browbeaten by Randemann, that he should lend his weakened and tarnished semblance of authority to a posse of known high-line riders. Like Judge Greenlee, the old marshal had lost the courage that once made him a commonly respected man.

Randemann ruled Torreon with the bad bunch and the fear of death, and aging men clung the more desperately to life as the years piled up on them—so often sinking to compromises scorned by younger men who had more to lose. The old men, too, had been young and proud in their time.

The riders charged up the sunken trail. Jim chopped another shot, glimpsing the bobbing swarm in the blackness, hitting a horse that reared wildly and pawed around broadside. Close-following horses crashed into it and heaped a tangle of snorting animals and cursing men.

Jim grabbed the lines back from Elizabeth and lashed the team. The buckboard lurched and swayed precariously on the deep-rutted curves.

Atop the highest point of the Mormons, with the thunder of the pursuers storming rapidly louder, he dragged the team to a stamping, uneasy halt.

He passed the lines to Elizabeth and said, jumping out, "You can't miss Dalhart an' the Ranger camp. They'll get you safe up to railhead. You board the first train north—an' don't come back, ever!"

She said, "No! You can't—"

He slapped the near horse hard with his hat, butting off all discussion. The team took off. For a brief moment he watched the buckboard go careening down the slope.

There went the payment of his score and the consummation of his promise to Buster Jack Breck. It would cost him everything, but he was still a young man and a proud man, never more proud than now.

Filling his gun, he walked in among the great chunks of grayish *tufa* rock lining the north side of the high pass. Right here, he had known all the way up, was where he had to make his stand. For the trail down to Dalhart from this point ran clear and open, offering little cover. Given such a break, riders could overhaul a buckboard in short order.

The bunch came streaming up the trail, stretched out and racing hard. They knew this mountain route to Dalhart. A thorough knowledge of little-used trails was part of their business. Jim leaned against a *tufa* rock and took careful aim over it.

He thought then, *Suppose I keep still and let them ride by?*

Temptation chewed at that thought. The prospect of getting himself killed this night in a shoot-out was hard to accept, now that it came right down to it. He could let them ride by, could mosey up into the Indian Nations and pick up a horse somewhere and just drift on—disappear forever from the Panhandle.

He smiled faintly and shook his head, as if denying an impossible request. His gun bloomed and roared into the pass, and a rider spilled and

the racing column broke. After that he watched the attack take shape.

The sunken pass was too deep to allow the men to ride their horses up the sheer banks, and too narrow for them to charge in a massed pack. Randemann and Laban, in a deadly hurry, rushed the attack as fast and thoroughly as it could be made. Men dismounted and clambered up the banks on foot, and prowled in, closing and drawing tight a circle surrounding the rocks.

Jim grew conscious of the coldness. At this high altitude the nights could be frigid in midsummer. The dry earth did not long retain the day's heat. He wore light daytime clothes.

The chilling air seemed to magnify sounds. Every shift he made brought a bullet at him. The porous, brittle *tufa* emitted a hollow *thunk!* at each striking bullet. Shivering from the cold, he eased stealthily to another rock, fired, crept back to another, fired again, moved on.

All he had to do, he kept reminding himself, was keep them from riding by. Painfully cold, he sucked the tips of his fingers, and even that soft sound stirred up three shots.

They were closing in on him. Now he was crouched down close to the ground, crawling from rock to rock, silently cursing the pale grayness of the *tufa* that outlined his figure all too plainly.

And then the furious anger flared up in him—the recklessly indignant reaction that Buster Jack had often warned him wisely against in the old longriding days. He reared up and yelled out:

"Come an' get me, you two-bit dandelions—here I am!"

He heard the swift rustle of a man back of him. He was tensed, scuttling around, when the gun barrel hit him squarely on his head like an explosion.

He did not feel Tal Randemann savagely kick his fallen body, nor hear him snarl a question concerning the satchel of money.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jailbait

JIM opened eyes that were glazed in a stupor of pain and sick weariness, and mumbled that he was thirsty, but nobody replied and he found he was alone. By a slant of light from a small window above him, he guessed that it must be early morning.

Gradually, he realized where he was: in a cell at the rear of the marshal's office. This puzzled him. He heaved up and sat on the edge of the iron bunk, discovering further hurts with each movement. Some part of the bunk rattled, jangling through his aching head like the clang of a bell. Seeing a tin pitcher of water on the floor, he grasped it up and drank deeply.

Evidently hearing these sounds, Marshal Goulard came to the cell door and looked through the bars. Goulard was not a brutal man, and he regarded Jim with a look in which condemnation and pity were mixed. Jim's hair was matted in blood and dirt; it streaked his face and was caked in his stubble of beard.

Goulard said, "You need doctor," and when Jim set the pitcher down Goulard spoke again, in a tone

of bitter disgust and resignation. "But you'll need one a lot worse, I guess, before the day's out."

Jim shook his head in weary puzzlement and asked, "How is it they didn't finish me on the mountain?"

"They let me bring you in. The charges, if you want to know, are holdup, kidnaping, armed robbery—"

"Yeah, but *why*?"

Goulard twitched a thin old shoulder. "Tal Randemann wants his money back, natch'ly. That's why. He aims to persuade you to tell him where you cached it."

Jim frowned dully as if he didn't understand. "I gave it to Elizabeth Breck. By now it's way out of Randemann's reach, on a northbound train."

"You'll never make him believe that. I don't hardly, myself. Why would you kidnap the girl, then give her all the money you robbed off Randemann, and—man, it don't make sense!"

"I can't help what anybody believes," Jim said.

Goulard looked down at the floor. "Randemann will be callin' on you here today—with some o' the boys. I only hope you remember quick where you cached his money."

"All I can tell him is what I've just told you."

"God help you, then!"

Later in the morning, sliding Jim his breakfast under the cell door, Goulard said, "You stuck up the stage an' took the girl off. That's what has got everybody flamin' mad. Nobody knows what you've done

with her. The town's packed full o' folks all swearin' to see you hanged for it. These are cowfolks. They've stood for too much lawless goings-on, an' this is the last straw.

"I can't say I blame 'em," he went on. "Torreon's their town. For a trail town it used to be better'n average an' we was all kinda proud of it. Now it's bad, one o' the worst. But you still can't kidnap a girl here an' get away with it, Naylor! That's goin' way too far!"

Jim thought of Elizabeth swæeping out the cabin, raiding the cooler, calmly taking over the kitchen. The contrast—between that and the hideous imaginings of the aroused cowfolks—edged toward the comic. Ignorance was a fearsome force, and what was unknown was sinister, while truth often contained innocent humor.

Jim asked, "Lynch?"

Goulard said heavily, "Not if I can stop it. An' for once the Laban bunch is backin' the law—on that, anyhow." He made to go, and looked back. "It's only fair to warn you. You're hang-bait for every decent citizen from the Mormons to West Benches! An' money-bait for all the other kind!"

"And my one and only protection is you."

"That's right."

Jim nodded, and after Goulard left he sat slackly on the bunk, driving all this into his mind and trying to see a way out. But there was no way out and he gave it up and made himself eat some of the breakfast.

When he shifted to set the plate and cup down at the door, the bunk rattled again. He looked at it, and raised the straw mattress and found

what caused the noise. One of the iron cross-straps was broken loose at the outside end. Letting the mattress fall back into place, he sat down again.

Presently he felt beneath the mattress and took hold of the broken end of the iron strap. Patiently, almost absent-mindedly, he began bending it back and forth. It was better than doing nothing while waiting for Randemann.

Toward noon he kept hearing murmuring groups of men tramp slowly along the street. The cowfolks from the outlying ranches were still in town. They were talking toward a decision, a mass jury verdict that would be irrevocable and without court of appeal. Too often and too long had crimes gone unpunished in Torreon.

Once there came a hush. From the corner building at the bridge Tal Randemann started a speech in his suavest and most persuasive tones. Snatches of it reached Jim's cell window.

"... must allow the law to follow its proper course! This foul crime. . . . But, gentlemen, let us not descend to the barbaric depths of lawless violence! The law—"

A hundred voices angrily growled and mocked him to silence. This was not Randemann's day to assert his influence over Torreon. He had Laban's bunch at his call, but today the cowfolks for once had organized and were in control.

The iron strap at last broke loose. Jim slid it out. He bent it double and sheathed it under his shirt. It wasn't

much, but it would do as a kind of weapon in the pinch. Goulard was no protection to speak of; his heart was right but his spirit had been drained out. He was not a fighter any more.

Somebody hit the marshal's door open, and entered, and shut the door. "Let me in that cell—quick!"

It was Laban. For a moment Goulard failed to respond.

Laban said in a low, gritty voice, "Give me the key, or I'll cut your damned old head off!" Then keys jingled on their ring.

Laban appeared at the cell door. His wide, blunt face glistened with sweat. His slightly slanted eyes glared tensely through the bars. The man was as taut and warily on guard as a guilty wolf prowling trap-set territory.

Cruelly stretched nerves caused the key in his hand to rattle and scrape against the lockplate. He held a ten-inch knife in the other hand, point and edge forward, sword-fashion. The fashion favored by the jayhawker butcher-boys and border Mexicans. He didn't touch his guns; too noisy for this day.

He flung the cell door open and said to Jim, in that same low-toned voice, "Where did you cache the money? Tell me!"

Jim knew then the reason behind Laban's terrible tension. Goulard was right. He—Jim Naylor—was money-bait for every longrider around Torreon. Laban was moving in first ahead of the competition, but his time was limited and there was Randemann on watch. It was Randemann's money, but to hell with Randemann—the money belonged to anybody who could get it!

Jim said, "I'll tell you," and Laban's slitted eyes widened in triumph. "It's safe," Jim said, and he let Laban come into the cell with his knife sticking out.

"Lord, I'm dry," Jim said. He put his right hand to his throat, and Laban dropped a glance to the tin pitcher.

Jim drew the bent piece of strap-iron from his shirt then and hit him twice, hard. Laban fell on the floor. Goulard was up front in his shabby office, seeing and hearing nothing of this.

Jim looked down at Laban, and he thought of Elizabeth—that calmly composed, courageous little girl. Unaccountably the thought gave him spirit to gamble on forward from here.

He dropped the piece of strap-iron and took Laban's guns from their cut-out holsters. As he straightened up he heard the marshal's door bang once more; then Tal Randemann's voice, not smoothly Southern now, but clipped, urgent.

"Goulard—did Laban come here?" As he spoke, striding through the office, Randemann must have spied the open door of the cell in the rear. It brought him up short.

Without waiting for the marshal's reply, he rapped, "Laban, you double-crossing mongrel, come out!" His hands seemed to brush lightly together, and came apart holding a pair of stubby sneak pistols.

Outside, the quiet murmuring continued, unbroken so far by any recognition of need for haste. The slow wrath of the cattle crowd was finding some outlet in discussion; the peak of

positive action would not be reached as long as a doubt remained.

Jim stepped across the senseless Laban. He cocked Laban's guns, and his next step took him out of the cell into the tiny corridor. There he would have spoken to Randemann, thrown him a word of warning, but one of the stubby pistols flashed a blaring discharge at him before he could utter a sound.

The bullet struck an iron bar of the open cell door and twanged it like the string of a giant harp. Randemann missed because as he touched the trigger he saw that his target was Jim, not Laban, and surprised uncertainty shook his aim. But the thing was done now. There was the shot and the clang of the cell door to bring everybody running—and the stark commitment of having fired at an armed enemy, and having to follow it through. Randemann brought his other pistol slicing up.

Jim tilted one gun and fired. Goulard dived at the street door, wrenched it open, and vanished, shouting:

"Naylor! He's got guns! It's Naylor!"

Randemann rocked back and sat down jarringly on the floor, and a look of outrage came into his face. He rolled half over and pushed himself to his knees, and picked up his loaded pistol. Jim stood motionless, paying close regard to the pistol and to nothing else. When he saw that Randemann was driven by a furious determination to go through with it, he leveled his smoking gun.

Randemann got all the way to his feet, and for a moment he stood like a formal duelist, ramrod-straight and head up. A massive dignity clung to him. He stared at the gun pointed

steadily at him and still it was a toss-up what he would do.

Then the blaze of furious pride expired abruptly, leaving his face sick and gray. He tossed his pistol aside with a tired gesture.

"I'm through," he murmured, and turned sluggishly and staggered into the crowd now jamming the street door.

One of the men commented, with no trace of sentiment, "He is, for a fact." To Jim he said in much the same tone, "Give up those guns, will you? You can't shoot out o' this crowd."

The man was Witt Tribble, owner of the Yucca outfit on West Benches. He was short and somewhat chubby, and the only remarkable feature about him was his untrimmed mustache, which gave him the belligerent and slightly foolish look of a toothless old terrier. But he was no fool.

In all matters of common interest, Witt Tribble was always the first to be consulted. His judgment could be relied upon to be utterly unbiased and bloodlessly honest. By the cold integrity of his character he had become the most respected man in the country among the cowfolks.

These were all cattlemen in this crowd. Jim, a cattleman, reversed his guns and walked forward and handed them over.

"They look like Laban's," remarked a puncher. To which Jim returned:

"He's back there, with a worse head than I've got. He called on me with his knife out, an' I nailed him. Then Randemann—"

Witt Tribble held up a hand. "Never mind that. It's an old story. Rascals fall out. Like Buster Jack and

Ringo Varney, of unrequited memory. We never guessed it, but it's plain now that you were in with Randemann and the Laban bunch—till you took the notion to stick 'em up and get rich in a hurry. Well, we can be liberal about that. Let the rascals fall out, I say."

He spoke like an aging judge who had learned to strip speech down to bare, chill essentials. The crowd of men listened, nodding silent agreement at each pause. They were armed, and most held their guns in their hands. Yet they remained gravely quiet. And the quietness of these men was infinitely more dangerous, more shatteringly relentless, than any shouts and threats.

It came to Jim that this shabby little office was the courtroom, these quiet men the jury, and Tribble was the judge summing up before the verdict. They were being fair, within the limits of their concrete convictions. This was a Judge Lynch trial. The end was all too obvious. Good men, as well as bad ones, were vulnerable to the promise of quick-avenging justice.

Don't wait for the cumbersome law machinery to creak its tardy gears, so many loopholes ready for the lively. Guilty, isn't he? Hang him now!

And even Witt Tribble, that icily honest man, was caught by it. He closed his upraised hand, but left the forefinger pointing. He pointed that finger at Jim and said:

"We've been *too* liberal. That's our fault. We've stood for it all—holdups, robberies, rustling. We're not liberal when it comes to stealing a girl an' doing away with her! You did that, didn't you? Answer me!"

"I took her off the stage," Jim allowed, "but I didn't—"

"By God, that's enough!" broke in Tribble frigidly, and he lowered his hand. He said slowly after that, "We're taking Torreon back. The rascals won't run our town, from this day on. You, Naylor, head our list of bad characters. As example to the rest of your damned crew, Naylor, we will hang you!"

This, Jim knew, was not simply Tribble's own personal judgment. No; Tribble was voicing the verdict of the mass jury.

In his mind Jim had already anticipated the sentence. In his heart he violently rejected it. As with any man, he could not bring himself to believe that this was the day of his death. He looked at Tribble and the rest, and from the set expressions he knew that there was no appeal left to him. He stood condemned. They stood relentless, silent.

From an almost forgotten sense of humor he dredged a line from a silly song that he had heard in the old Birdcage Theater in Tombstone, sung by an English comedian:

Never try to roister with an oyster. . .

The memory made him grin sparsely; the words were so apt to this occasion. Comedians were essentially wise philosophers. The clowns understood the wisdom of the world, and they reduced it to a jest.

Jim said, "Today? Now?"

Tribble replied almost compassionately, "Right now." And, in explanation: "We know we're taking the law into our hands. We think it's high time we did. You ready, Naylor?"

"I'm ready," Jim said.

He thought once more of Elizabeth. She was safe. He thought of Buster Jack and of his kind, patient nursing

of a pal who was hard hit and in need of care. That score was paid.

These good men could never understand all that. Black was black, white was white; the gradations did not contain for them the bright, warm flash of loyal friendship. Old Jack, bad company for anybody, had risked his neck for his friend down there in the run to Hidalgo and the nursing in the brush.

So Jim said, "I'm ready." He let them steer him out of the marshal's office, for there remained nothing more that he could do or say, nothing that could sway these upright men from their grim purpose.

They put him on a horse and tied his hands, and set off with him. Randemann's saloon was closed, he noticed, and the Laban bunch was nowhere to be seen. An extraordinary quietness had settled over the town.

A few storekeepers and others watched from doorways as the crowd of horsemen rode by, and from their expressions Jim could guess what they were thinking about him. If any man ever looked like a desperado, he did, unshaved and dirty and bloodstained.

They jogged across the bridge, upward of a hundred armed men and a prisoner, none of them saying a word now, and took the trail south. Jim didn't bother to ask where they were taking him. He rode slackly, his aching eyes squinted nearly shut against harsh sunlight, and when at last the halt came he glanced up and saw the abandoned old roadhouse. It still flaunted its big, fading sign:

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He wondered whether they had chosen this spot because it struck them as the most appropriate, or simply because here in the yard stood the only tree of suitable size for miles around—a tall cottonwood with a high limb. The question had no importance for him and he dismissed it. A little way down the trail he could see the place where he and Buster Jack Breck had pulled in for a smoke and a powwow.

There was an uncertain wait, lasting until one of the cowmen loosed his rope and spoke with forced briskness. "Let's get it over!" He twirled the rope and tossed it neatly over the high limb, and the loop came swinging down.

Several of the others called out to him to wait, and Tribble said, "Hold it, Henry. Buckboard coming, an' a couple riders. Looks like a woman. Let 'em go by first."

Seconds later he remarked disapprovingly, "That's a hell of a way to use horses on a hot day. What're they doing—running a race?"

It looked like it. The buckboard came careening down the trail, the driver laying the whip on, the girl beside him clinging to the seat, and two men on horseback thundering alongside. They swerved into the yard and slid to a dust-raising halt, and the hard-used horses stood sweating and blowing.

"Gentlemen," said the driver courtously, flicking a glance at the dangling rope, "are we interrupting something?"

He was thin and fair, and mild-mannered. They all knew him: Kernan, captain of Rangers. And the two

riders were Rangers from the Dalhart camp. Jim had always avoided meeting any of them face to face. Witt Tribble spoke up.

"Frankly, yes. We've got a man here who kidnaped a girl—Breck's daughter—off the stage yesterday. Did away with her."

Captain Kernan turned to the girl beside him. "Miss Breck, you didn't mention that. Oh—beg pardon, gentlemen—this is Miss Elizabeth Breck. She is not done away with, I assure you.

"She practically wrecked the Dalhart camp. A certain Mr. Jim Naylor, it seemed, was in a very bad spot, and she ordered my whole company to follow her to his rescue. They'd have done it, too, if I hadn't been there, I think. Now what's this kidnap thing?"

Stepping down from the buckboard, Elizabeth asked in her quiet way, "Captain, may I borrow your knife, please? Thank you."

She went straight to Jim and cut free his hands, saying conversationally, "Mr. Naylor met the stage and I went with him to his home to discuss a business matter. Afterward he sold my father's property for me. Then some men came to steal the money, and—well, I've told you what happened, Captain."

She had been up all night, most of the time bouncing over bad roads in a buckboard, and still she appeared untired and self-possessed.

Captain Kernan nodded gravely, as if nothing more that she said or did could possibly surprise him. He seemed to obtain some private humor from the bewilderment of the cow-

men. He mentioned to them, "In Torreon we picked up quite a tale about this Naylor man."

More sharply, the captain said to Jim, "Listen, you! Miss Breck handed a leather bag to me, for safekeeping, which you gave her. It happens to contain not only money, but other valuables—loot from several robberies, including the Cumberton train holdup and robbery of U. S. mail! Where did you get it?"

"From Randemann," said Jim. He slid off saddle and stood beside Elizabeth. "The man I sold Breck's Ranch to. Randemann didn't want to buy, but I—persuaded him he should."

He saw Elizabeth then, gazing at the fading sign on the dilapidated old trap of a roadhouse, quiet shock in her eyes. The sense of failure hit him sickeningly. He sent Kernan a dismal look and lowered his brows.

"I didn't want her to—come here."

And then the crowd caught on. Witt Tribble spread his hands in helpless regret, and others tried embarrassedly to gaze anywhere but at the silent girl. There were some things about the strange affair that they could only guess at, but the main facts now stood clear. Kernan drew Jim aside and put one last question to him.

"How did you know Miss Breck would be on that stage?"

The answer was simple and Jim gave it so. "I've been keepin' a close tally on Randemann. Two nights back I heard him an' Laban—in his office—tell Dutch Wassoon what to do."

Kernan regarded him searchingly. "I see. We'll pick up that pair, if they're not too ruined for any use."

He paused and said, "I know you Jim Naylor. Stick around. We've got

to straighten out this money business for Miss Breck. Then I won't know you any more. I think now you'd do well to ease her away from this graveyard of iniquity. Take the buckboard and I'll use your horse."

Nodding his thanks, Jim rolled a cigarette and walked to the roadhouse. He lighted up as he shoved open the sagging door. In a moment he returned, and took Elizabeth's arm and led her away.

Driving the buckboard slowly up the trail to Torreon, he could find nothing to say to her. He looked back past the column of riders shuffling behind, and saw the smoke of burning Breck's Ranch coiling blackly upward in the still, clear air. Tribble and Kernan and others nodded briefly to him, knowing what he had done there, approving it.

From some inner resource of faith, Elizabeth was able to raise her head and say softly, "He couldn't have been *really* bad, Jim—or you couldn't have been his friend. He sometimes mentioned your name in his letters to me. That's why I wasn't too afraid of you."

Jim said, "Jack was a fine man in ways that counted with me. In the pinch he was always right there."

She gave a satisfied little sigh, accepting this as the true and final judgment. "Could we get my trunk at the express, and take it on to the cabin, Jim?"

"Cabin? My cabin?" His face altered gently. "Look, honey, we're not—"

"Yes, of course," she said tranquilly. "The cabin. I haven't finished the kitchen yet, Jim."

THE END

The Plunderer's Season

A NOVELETTE BY PAUL L. PEIL



With Union and Confederacy at each other's throats, it looked as if the Cherokees faced another Trail of Tears.

CHAPTER ONE

Showdown

ONCE during that depressive journey into Tahlequah, Indian Agent Brad Ingalls drew aside from the motley procession and watched it file past. The scene seemed to reverse itself in his mind's eye, with

the weary figures wending into a westering sun, instead of east, as now.

He had no personal memory of that other tragic trek—long to be remembered by these people as the Trail of Tears—but it must have resembled this on a major scale. The Trail was his heritage; he had been born on it. Though not a drop of Cherokee blood coursed through his veins, he was Cherokee in heart.

Sunken-eyed and gaunt with two youngsters clamped fore and aft on his Chickasaw mare, he studied the small army of Beaver refugees. Tattered, grimy men, a few mounted, the rest trudging in silence. Several charred farm wagons, loaded with solemn women and children. A lone barouche, rolling with a *bois-de-arc* dragpole in lieu of a missing wheel. In the midst of household effects piled in this carriage sat a dignified matron—Mrs. Beaver, herself wounded, yet stoic and proud.

There had been others in the all-night fight. The badly wounded ones were back at Park Hill Mission, receiving medical aid.

Bringing up the rear, Oglethorpe Beaver heeled his mule over beside Ingalls. An old Roman in face and form, the Cherokee betrayed no expression on his high-boned, leathery countenance. He looked as noble on this lowly drudge animal as on one of his blooded trotters. That, Brad thought, was something the white man's civilization couldn't alter.

The clan chief wasn't immune to tragedy, however; it was in his lusterless eyes, his toneless voice as he said, "Have no regrets, my friend. We all did our best."

Impotent anger twisted Ingalls's dark, not unhandsome features. "That's just it! Our best wasn't good enough." They swung in behind the jaded column. "So what does it mean? If you, one of the biggest landholders in the Nation, can't cope with them, who can? They'll raid like wild-fire now! And it's not merely stomphappy Copper Pins either; there's too much design to the thing!"

Beaver nodded, gave a tired grunt. "Looking back won't help. Maybe tomorrow, at the Council—"

Crunching up a gravelly dip and around a grove of Osage orange, they entered the Cherokee capital. Its populace was in an excited mill around the arrivals. Brad lifted his voice above the clamor.

"Better think of today—and Johnny! He'll be hard to handle after this. That New Orleans schooling has turned him into a first-rate fire-eater."

Beaver sighed, said, "I am thinking of Johnny," and rode on.

Brad unloaded his passengers, then angled toward the Agency buildings, which were situated on a hill overlooking the hickory-shaded town. His dusty-blue eyes stared at them, without seeing them. He still saw other buildings—Ogle Beaver's plantation—going up in smoke, a landmark of integrity and progress being reduced to ashes. . . .

A slender girl stood on the long, shadowy veranda of the main log-and-rock building; she was looking toward him, waiting, it seemed. Throwing a leg Indian-style over the mare's neck to dismount in the yard, Brad absently recalled that she had been standing there yesterday at dusk, watching him leave.

A bright-eyed Cherokee boy rose from hunkers beneath a pin oak and took charge of his horse. Aching in every muscle, his bullet-barked ribs throbbing, Ingalls moved to a near-by water trough. Despite his lassitude, he was mentally checking off the string of saddlers tethered there at the Agency's hitchrail. Then, bowing his lathy frame, he immersed his sandy-thatched head.

The girl was beside him when he raised his dripping face from the water, and for a long moment he stood idly relaxed, studying her. Neither spoke; words were unnecessary with her. Her presence, now as always, had the ability to dispel fatigue from his brain, if not his body. He thought bitterly what an utter damfool young Johnny Beaver was, to hold this girl's affection so lightly!

Willowy in stature, with golden-brown features and raven's-wing hair, she was really a woman, mature, beautiful—and too damned desirable!

He said presently, "I made a bad guess, Ruth. There were fifty or sixty in that party, at least. Beaver's folks couldn't handle them. They burned him out—house, sheds, cabins. They destroyed his crops, ran off all the stock. It was a concentrated wipe-out!"

Ruth White Horse nodded her turbaned head. "Yes, Brad, we know. Haze Walker brought the news an hour ago."

"Haze?" Brad frowned, snorted. "He was probably hid out in the 'jacks, enjoying the fight." Canting his head toward the racked ponies: "That explains the company waiting for me. Aim to force a showdown, eh?"

She nodded again, and matched his loose-swinging gait toward the peeled-log structure. It occurred to him, briefly conscious of her lithe movement beside him, that she always was attuned to his moods, his needs. Without her, his task as agent would be mighty hard.

And, as usual of late, when he thought of her, Johnny hovered in the

background. That wasn't odd—only irritating. He wondered why. From childhood he and Ruth and Johnny had been inseparable. Certainly they were together now in this crisis!

Her mind apparently ran in the same channel. She asked, "Remember how we three used to sit on hassocks in the big hall, summer nights, listening to Paper Beaver spin his magic yarns about the Old Nation?"

"Or roam the fields, all of us riding that swaybacked bay nag?"

"And the time curiosity made you peep at that picture of Andy Jackson, the traitor, which Ogle kept turned face to the wall? When he caught and switched you, I laughed till I cried."

"You cried," he corrected her, "because I larruped you for laughing."

He was watching her face as they mounted the rock steps, and though the shake roof shut off sunlight, her suddenly shadowed expression came from within. Entering the room, they were greeted by a volatile silence.

This gathering was a representative cross-section of the Cherokee Nation. Here were full-bloods, mixed breeds, and white squawmen. Intelligent men, stupid men. The blanket and hunting-shirt mingled with the nankeen and fustian of Southern gentlemen. The energetic, the lazy; the old way and the new. Brad had seen the types elsewhere, in Boston, St. Louis, Memphis. People were the same, regardless of race.

Breaking the tension, a tall scholarly fellow wearing glasses rose from a chair, moved forward. "Brad," he said gravely, "in view of events, we feel we must reach an immediate understanding."

If ever he needed a clear faculty for reasoning, Brad knew this was it. This crowd had to be kept in line; had to be convinced the Cherokees' destiny hung in a balance. Yet as he studied the strained faces before him, there was one that completely infuriated him, that thrummed the lone exposed nerve of his self-control.

Ott Drumbo was a beefy white man, in his mid-forties. He wore bristling burnsides, had bulldog jaws; his murky-gray eyes were deep-socketed, overhung by bushy brows. The perpetual sneer was on his thick lips now, as he leaned against the wall, eying Brad through the smoke from a cigar clamped in his film-stained teeth. He was an agitator, with no other reason for being here.

Brad sought to ignore him. He asked the bespectacled Indian, "Surrender the arsenal. Is that it, Mark?"

Mark Knight, editor of *The Advocate*, the Nation's double-language newspaper, qualified his answer. "You word it bluntly, Brad. We must be armed for protection; surely you don't oppose that. If Tahlequah were raided, only one townsman in a dozen has a weapon. We'd be helpless."

"True," Brad said, and his pause ran out stubbornly. Then: "But until the Council submits a feasible plan for militia, a responsible organization, I must refuse."

A hush palpitated through the room. A fly droned loudly; outside sounds took on accent. Abruptly, harshly, Ott Drumbo laughed.

"Told yuh-all it'd be time wasted," he said. "Let's seize th' arsenal. He ain't got no authority nohow. His gover'mint's in a war, gittin' its ears

pinned back by Johnny Rebs. We're on our own here in Indian Territory. How about it, men?"

"No!" Through horn-rims, Knight's gaze swept over the gathering. "I'm not advocating violence!"

Now the hush had a pressure. It grew, and the group, which had been a unit of sorts, began to break under it. A man in overalls, with twin strands of braided hair, stepped close to Drumbo; a second followed, and another. A Bird clansman, with eagle wing feather aslant from his shapeless hat, moved alongside Knight; a full-blood Old Settler did likewise with surprisingly agile step, a young buck in his wake.

The others stayed put, their carefully preserved neutrality uncomfortable as they glanced from one faction to the other. Plain indecision held them.

The thing had a grim value to Brad. On a small scale this was the situation in the Nation. Sooner or later that middle group, that majority, would choose a side. He had to swing them right!

He said, "Surely you can see my point, Mark. With our present differences, I won't arm hotspurs who might terrorize the countryside."

Drumbo laughed again. "Hotspurs, eh!" He puffed arrogantly on his stogie, then rolled it into a corner of his mouth. Deep hatred mingled with his wicked triumph. "Wal, if yuh'd took along some hotspurs yesterday evenin'—stead of ridin' off so pow'ful important with a few Lighthawss police—ol' Beaver's farm might still be standin'!"

Brad twisted a tighter rein on his

control, continued to ignore Drumbo. Without trying to alibi, he told the others, "I made a mistake, thinking it was another hit-and-run attack by a few Copper Pins. It was well-planned and executed; it was, I'm certain, the first stroke in a deliberate campaign."

"Campaign? What kind of campaign?" Drumbo's sharpened tone and probing glance put Brad on guard. All the way into town he had nursed a suspicion that Drumbo, in some fashion, was implicated in that raid. Just how—

His delay in answering seemed to relieve Drumbo, who sneered sarcastically, saying, "Yuh sure can see boogers in th' dark, Ingalls! Like me runnin' illicit likker. Yuh never proved I was, even if'n yuh did git my sutler's license revoked."

"I proved you speculated with Cherokee crops, defrauded and profiteered! I— Dammit, Drumbo, don't bring personal issues into this! We're not settling them now."

Drumbo pushed himself forward from the wall. "I will, whenever I catch yuh without that fancy Dragoon pistol an' yer police bodyguards. I say yuh sold Beaver out! If there's a campaign, yuh should know! Yuh're a Federal politician; we're Southern sympathizers."

He broke off to watch Brad tug at the buckle of his concho-studded belt.

Ruth White Horse suddenly was at Brad's side, gripping his arm. "Don't, Brad! You've had enough fighting!"

Brad's gaze burned steady on Drumbo. "Enough, yes. But not too much, Ruth." The belt free, he extended it and the holstered Colt's to her. "I'll accommodate him, and he

won't find me a *kalu-hu*—a skin-and-bones pushover like old Haze Walker his pa-in-law."

CHAPTER TWO

Bad News

THE cigar sagging in his slack mouth, Drumbo showed a moment of startled unreadiness. Before he could recover and brace himself, Brad sprang like a panther across the room, into him, flinging him against the log wall.

Drumbo was dwarfed by Brad's height, and he was kettle-bellied, yet under his folds of beef was a cast-iron frame. Like many heavy men, he was surprisingly light, fast on his feet. Brad had the reach, and his slab muscles were deceptive, but he was tired to the bone. To win this fight, he knew he must grab the advantage and hold it.

During Brad's five years as Cherokee agent, Drumbo had been the thorn in his side, the bad blood building up. He'd robbed as sutler; he'd trafficked in moonshine. When Brad busted him, he'd beaten the exit deal by an unexpected marriage with Haze Walker's teen-age daughter. As squaw man, he became vested with certain tribal rights; by that token—although much had happened meantime—his presence here today was permissible. This was the boil come to a head.

They clinched and slugged, now against the wall, then in the middle of the floor. Brad got in more blows, his fists sinking into soggy flesh without

apparent effect. When Drumbo did connect, he jarred Brad from top to bottom. The silent watchers in the long room shifted, dodged from their path. Wooden-pegged furniture fell apart under their weight.

Brad was spending himself, panting, his burned ribs wet with blood, their temporary dressing torn loose. He was on a knee, blunting the smash of Drumbo's box-toed boot; grabbing a leg, throwing the man. They rolled, and Drumbo came out on top, and he flashed a whet-edged bowie.

Brad got the arm and wrist in both his hands; stayed the drive of the blade. But in him was little strength. He strained until his chest seemed bursting, still Drumbo was there above him, with bared yellow teeth and bugging eyes.

He didn't know how he tore the knife free, nor how he managed to regain his feet. They were simply erect again; he was throwing punches that were wild, feeble. Drumbo broke his defense, came closing in. Brad cocked, let go.

It was his last wad, and when Drumbo clipped him in the same moment, marring his aim, despair flooded him. Remotely he felt the quiver along his arm, heard the crunch of bone under fist, as he landed it under Drumbo's heart.

Drumbo whooshed, wobbled; his hands fell to his sides. Brad saw his eyeballs roll upward, and now with effort dredged from some unknown reservoir, he waded in. Shoving punches, he sent the squawman reeling backward, crashing through the mosquito-barred door onto the veranda, where he collapsed.

For a dizzy space Brad stood in the portal, watching Drumbo's inert body, then he turned back into the room where Ruth was saying: "If you pick up this fight, Elk Tooth, I'll finish it!"

She held Brad's Dragoon on the fidgety Indian in nankeen overalls. Her brown eyes snapped. With impatient fury, she flicked the Colt's over the entire group.

"*Ta-yi!* Get out! All of you—pests, maggies! Badgering a man who's more Cherokee in spirit than all of you put together. *Ta-yi!*"

Brad said, "No, Ruth." When he moved over beside her, she slipped an arm around his waist, steadying him. "I'll discuss it, if they still want to. The situation's serious, however; I won't sugar-coat facts or waste words. I'm not in the mood."

He reeled as he shifted his weight, and the white-haired, leather-faced Old Settler approached him. Fumbling under his blanket, he produced a bottle of Monongahela. Extending it, he grinned toothlessly.

"Here, take. It good for your miseries." After Brad accepted it, he hunkered down against a wall, declaring, "You good son of Father in Wash'ton. Me too old to fight, but will listen."

Brad regarded the Drumbo partisans. Elk Tooth debated, then nodded.

He said, "I'll listen, but I'm not too old to fight."

Brad went to a cherrywood desk in a corner, rummaging briefly through its top litter before he perched on its edge.

"Bacon Rind, I'm sorry you consider me *unaka*—white," he said. "I've tried to be blood brother to the Cherokee. My father was your missionary in the Old Nation, your first agent here in the West. I was born in a rickety carryall on your Trail of Tears, my mother dying along with a fourth of your people. I—"

The old Indian rose lithely, protesting, "You one of us, *chickasaw*!" Groping for expression, he switched to Cherokee. "You are a brave man, and truthful. As such, you belong to no race. You have not led us astray, but suffered with us instead. You speak the words of the White Father with a tongue that is ours!" He shuttled his glance around. "We should listen and heed."

Warmed by the tribute, Brad was absently aware of Ruth beside him. From a cubbyhole she brought forth the clay pipe he had vainly sought; passed him tobacco and sulphur-tip. She gave him something more: a strength he had come to expect from her.

He said, "As one of the Five Civilized Tribes, we're progressive Indians. We've adopted the white man's way of life. We've done it through choice, not force." He drew flame into the tamped bowl. "And we must like it, because we've done it twice—back in Georgia, and here since the Removal."

Mark Knight said, "There's no question of that. We've never failed the Government, but I contend they're failing us now! Because they're in a civil war, they've withdrawn their soldiers. We're helpless, unarmed, open to attack from our next-door

neighbors, the Pawnees and Comanches."

"Hold on, Mark. That's a future danger, not our present one."

Mark, caught evading the main point, studied the floor.

Bacon Rind said, "'Tis ourselves we must watch, or wind up like the snake that ate its own tail. I'm an old man, with many mistakes to admit. In the Old Nation we were divided in opinion. Had two political parties, much as the white man. It makes them strong, but us weak; why, I do not know.

"I came west forty years ago with John Jolly. My brethren came later, driven like cattle. We've rebuilt our Nation; still we have no unity. The Ridge has formed his Copper Pin society, is shouting Union. Down here, Stand Watie is yelling Confederacy. The feuds are growing. Beware or the Law of Blood will be invoked by the Grand Council, and the Cherokee will not survive it again!"

Brad broke the tense silence that followed. "We've got to keep our heads, Mark! The rebellion is not ours. We have self-government; in fact, the only autonomy ever granted by the United States. Let's settle our differences, protect our borders. If we jump into this war—take sides—it'll be worse than Missouri, where brother is fighting brother, father against son."

They were a tableau, grave with reflection.

Then the quarter-breed youth beside Elk Tooth jeered, "Mr. Drumbo was right. You're a Federalist, don't want us to join the Southerners. Well, my folks own slaves. When General

Albert Pike comes through again, recruiting, I'm ready. After we finish your Yankees, you won't have no right here."

Brad said softly, "I'll always have a right here. My heart is here." His tone hardened as he thought of the North with its industry, the South with its idealism. "I'll venture you this—the war's a scant year old; before it's over the rebels will be shooting nail instead of Minie balls."

The youth growled, took a step forward, whereupon Elk Tooth gripped his shoulder, saying, "Shut up, Buck," and pulled him back. Now he moved out, a solid threat of brown man, in sweaty overalls, with features sad-hard.

"I care not for the white man's war. I want only to farm and live. We'll see what the Council does. But if I'm burned out, like Ogle Beaver, I hold you responsible—you and your pad-locked arsenal!"

The moment was a still pool with widening ripples of pressure on its surface, until Ruth's voice splashed into it. She said, "*Ta-yi!*" and the Dragoon's long barrel described circles in the air.

After they had gone, she forced Brad into his ell living-quarters. He sat on his bed, too tired to protest, while she stripped off his blood-plastered shirt; he lay with head sunken in goose-down pillow while she bathed and dressed his side. So gentle, yet firm, and always efficient. He wondered how he'd ever manage without her.

He said, "There were white men in that raid, Ruth. Border ruffians—"

"Of course. This is the plunderer's season, and we Cherokees are fair game." When he raised his head, to sit up, her hand pressed against his forehead, restraining him. "*Atsi-sta*, Brad. Get some sleep. You've been up twice around the clock, half of it fighting. Rest, now!"

He lay at length, eyes shut, his fingers closed around her soft hand there at his temple. Then he thought of Johnny Beaver, to whom riding and ranting meant more than this girl, and reluctantly his hand released hers. He was conscious of her tugging at his cordovan boots as he slid off into a sleep that was made disturbing by Johnny's presence.

At noon he woke from his restless slumber. Aching as he donned boots, he listened to the loud talk of *Tahle-quah*. Slipping into a loose doeskin hunting-shirt, he cinched his gun belt outside it and moved out on the veranda. The day was sticky with a fore-running summer humidity. Yonder, over the stoutly built, saddle-roofed arsenal of undressed logs, a thunder-head drifted by, like a rumpled blanket in the hot heavens.

He recognized the mail hack at the foot of the hill. A former army conveyance from Cantonment Gibson, it was kept in service now by a contract operator named Riley. He was talking excitedly with a crowd of townspeople. Presently he left them, rolled up the slant, and halted before Brad.

"Heerd th' news about Pittsburg Landin'?" he asked as Brad descended the steps. "Whoppin' big battle. Secesh victory." He was spotted with dried mud; so was the hack. The pouch he gave Brad was sodden. "Sorry it's wet. I bucked a storm all

th' way from Fort Smith. Th' Spad-ra's at swimmin' stage. Could use a rain here, couldn't you?"

"Yeh," Brad agreed conversationally, his mind and attention on the people in the street below. This news wouldn't help his case; Johnny had beat the South's drum ever since Sumter. "Yeh, we sure could."

Riley drove off. Brad was crossing the verandah when someone called his name. He paused, turned, watching a scarecrow figure shuffle from the building corner and climb the steps. He wore cowhide buskins, a headband around scraggly gray hair. His pinto calfskin vest partially covered a woolen undershirt almost as dirty-hued as his mustard pants.

Haze Walker was a derelict, but there clung to him traces of his Scotch sagacity and Indian dignity that once had made him a high man in the Kituwah clan. For three years he had been on the skids, staying boozed or eating smuggled *peyote*. Brad, knowing the cause, pitied him; for Haze was trying to live out his days in an escape world. Ott Drumbo had smashed his other world.

Ott had surprise-wed Haze's only kin, the daughter he idolized. Hardly more than a child, she had been driven to suicide by Ott's abuse. Ott had cinched his position in the Nation by the marriage; had made himself solid by taking over Haze's prosperous horse ranch in the Catoosa.

Furtively glancing about, Haze said, "Wanta tell y' somethin', Brad. I watched that attack from the paw-paw. 'Twas more white men than Copper Pins."

Brad nodded wearily. "I know that, Uncle Haze. Now you run along,

I'm busy. We'll smoke and powwow later."

"Lemme tell you this, Brad. I saw 'em steal Ogle's horses! I saw—"

The sharp clatter of hoofs and shouting jerked Brad's gaze streetward. Horsemen had ridden in, were being surrounded by townsfolk. Until their dust fog thinned out, Brad couldn't identify them. Then, in long strides, he swung past Walker, down the steps.

Johnny Beaver was back.

CHAPTER THREE

Gone Mean

JOHNNY sat a blue-tick roan that was marbled with dry lather. Flanking him were a dozen-odd followers, all of them youths, hard-faced and gun-girded. They were like him, *tsun-di*, rebellious youngsters who flouted convention, defied the restraint of their clan elders.

Under Johnny, they were ranging the Nation, breathing fire, fanning old hatreds. The past winter, between nuisance raids by the slaveholding Copper Pins, Brad had been kept busy putting out the blazes Johnny's crowd started. Except for Brad, their efforts would have resulted in a huge bonfire.

So their meetings were always curled around the edges with hostility. Each time a little more pronounced, as now. Studying them, Brad was pained, knowing they reflected Johnny's lead. In a silence broken only by the horses' flutters, he said:

"I'm glad you're here, Johnny."

Johnny's eyes were liquid-brown,

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soft in an otherwise cold mask of features. They held steady on Brad, revealing nothing, as he said, "You should've been with us, Brad, old chum. Big doings. Routed a Union-preaching party at Keota; lined up Charlie Fox's plantation; then finished off with a whinging at Spa-town. Too much hill corn. That's why we're late, but we sure had fun!"

Thumbing back his hand-woven, broad-brim planter's hat, he grinned insolently. The sparkler on his little finger glittered; there was another diamond in the ruffled cravat he wore over a pleat-front shirt.

Tight-lipped, Brad roved his gaze over the compact figure, clad in its expensive broadcloth, so arrogantly at ease on that fine animal. He must not lose his head, as he had with Drumbo. Johnny must be reasoned with, somehow.

He said, "Others have their fun too, Johnny."

"Yeh, that's what I hear." Johnny's voice had a malicious note, an almost pleased note that grated on Brad.

"Well, the old man asked for it. I told him he'd better be ready to fight. Know what he told me?" He imitated his parent's deeper timbre: "'My son, since the days of Oglethorpe, back in Georgia, no Beaver has been a war chief. I am a peace chief.' So—I hope he saved his pipe."

He chuckled. Brad thought, *You cold-blooded ingrate! No concern about the loss, physical or property, nor even about your mother's welfare.* Shifting in saddle, his knee brushing the .54 Starr carbine in its sheath, Johnny bent forward, narrowly eyeing Brad.

"You didn't try trailing the raid-

ers? Of course not; it'd be no use. And it doesn't matter." He spoke to a rider beside him. "Joe, see about our change of horses. Rest of you, grab a bite to eat. We'll ride in half an hour."

With a mock salute at Brad, he swung his dusty roan—or rather, half-swung it, for Brad halted it, gripping its nose piece.

Brad said flatly, "Ride where, Johnny? I have my police tracking that stock. They'll recover at least a part of it."

Johnny shrugged, saying, "A horse is a horse." He attempted, and failed, to jerk his mount free, and now hatred showed naked for an uncontrolled moment on his dark face.

"Retaliation, Johnny? A raid for a raid? Oh, no! It's been many a moon, not in your time nor mine, since Cherokees rode the hair-and-horses trail. You're not starting any modern version!"

Grinning again, Johnny became slack in the seat. The pause seemed prolonged, the silence acute, before he asked, "You aim to stop me, do you, Brad?"

With a flirt of the wrist, he had suddenly produced a gun. It was a five-shot Paterson Colt's, and his brushed-back coat revealed its mate on an opposite hip. This one he idly fondled, balancing it in his palm, this side, then the other side.

Presently he repeated, "Well, do you?"

The thoughts ran, like a touched-off powder train, through Brad's mind: *He's gone mean. I've seen him turn into a vicious, snapping dog—but is he rabid enough to kill? To shoot me, his friend since childhood?*

He stood immobilized, realizing his

tight spot, and listened to Johnny say, "Another thing, Brad. When I return, if you haven't surrendered that armory, we'll take it by force. We're tired of your stalling politics!"

Repressed rage quivered along Brad's arm, still holding the roan's bridle. "You should rant about politics! You and Drumbo play the same tune. I don't care whether we're Confederate, Union, or Bullfiddle. I don't intend to see every gain we've made as Cherokees forfeited by your renegade actions! Is that clear?"

He saw the lust flare in Johnny's eyes, saw the gun flick tense. He knew then, with a sickening flash, that Johnny Beaver considered him enemy enough to eliminate him!

He thumb-gouged the roan's tender nostril; held on while it jumped in pain. The second time he gouged it, he released bridle and fell back, for the horse went into a pitching throe. Johnny, loose in the saddle, rein-grabbing with both hands, dropped the gun.

Brad let it lie in the dust. With thumbs hooked in his gun belt, he waited for Johnny to calm the animal. The Beaver cohorts stirred uneasily; townspeople drifted out to a wider perimeter. Johnny slid off the roan's back.

He stood above the Colt's, but did not bend to retrieve it. Measuring Brad, dissembling his humiliation, he slowly smiled. His hard features, lined by dissipation, had an evil cast. Five years younger than Ingalls, he looked five older.

He said, "I never figured you were so much Cherokee, old chum. Nail-heads on your holster belt, and that hide shirt. Damn if its needlework

don't look familiar—Ruth's? Stick a feather in your hair, put on some mocs, and you could pass for a watered-down Indian. Naw-sir, Brad, you're no white man."

With the same sarcasm, Brad said, "And you're no Indian, Johnny. You've turned white, rabble-rousing mind and all!"

In their tension, neither observed Ruth's approach until she came between them. She stopped before Brad, shieldingly, raking Johnny with her hot gaze. Then she turned full face to Brad. Tall and slender, they were two of a kind.

She said, "Leave Johnny Beaver to me, Brad," and when Brad hesitated, she added, "Please!"

Brad mumbled, "All right," and spoke across the interval: "I'll expect you at the Agency before you leave, Johnny."

As he pivoted, Ruth was walking toward Johnny, and he didn't miss the manner in which she kept him blocked off from Johnny. He knew it was intentional.

He heard Johnny growl, "Save your breath, Ruth. Damned if you don't act like we were married. I don't need your squaw talk today."

With bitter, hard-to-believe thoughts, he climbed the hill.

CHAPTER FOUR

Unfailing

HAZE WALKER hunkered under a red mulberry, but Brad paid him no attention. Sending a boy after Mark Knight, the editor, he called in the three tribal policemen from the arsenal. They were all he

had; the rest of his meager force was out in the hills.

He had to stop Johnny somehow; he meant to try, whether he got by with it or not. If Johnny rode, he'd spoil what small chance remained for an agreeable solution. Against such a background there would be no Grand Council. The head men of the seven clans would be kiting back home, to attack or stand attack!

Yet had he attempted to arrest Johnny there in the street, he knew Tahlequah would have been split wide open by those for and against Johnny's fire-brand doctrine. But if he could toll Johnny up here, alone, by damn he meant to try and hold him! Maybe Mark could swing some support—

The police instructed and posted, he was striding toward the Agency when old Haze shuffled up beside him, tugging at his sleeve. "Got to tell y' this, Brad. I know where Ogle's horses are at. I saw 'em."

Brad halted. "Where?"

Haze glanced around, apprehensively. His whisper was husky. "I was in the pawpaw, Brad. Then I followed 'em. They went north, into Osage country. Neosho Fork. Know the Bartle place? Well, I saw 'em camp-up there. I ducked out 'fore they discovered me. But I saw 'em!"

Brad frowned, thinking aloud: "They had a four-five hour start on us when we broke the siege. But the cattle went west, into Copper Pin country. My Lighthorse picked up their sign."

Haze repeated, "Not the horses. I followed 'em!"

Brad studied Haze, basing his decision on one thing. Although a human

wreck, Haze was no liar. He hurried inside for his fifteen-shot rimfire Henry, then trotted to the horse shed. As he saddled a fresh gelding, Ruth joined him.

Her features were drawn, tired. She stood so close she could have rested her head on his chest.

She said, "For once I couldn't handle him, Brad. He's—not our Johnny, is he? He's got the town agog over this Shiloh victory, as if it means more than his own family's disaster."

"Shiloh?"

"The latest war battle."

"The mail driver called it Pittsburg Landing." He tested cinches, dropped stirrup leather. He faced her, and in their nearness he touched her elbow with his hand, and held it there. "Listen, Ruth. Haze spilled some news I got to check on. You and Mark must detain Johnny until I return. I don't know how—"

"He'll be here," she said. "Ott Drumbo did what I couldn't. He called Johnny aside. I heard him rake Johnny over the coals. Told him to cool off and stay in town."

He said, "Drumbo did?" and in his mind Johnny and Drumbo and that all-night fight seemed mixed up together. Then he was conscious of Ruth, so close, clutching folds of his shirt with both hands.

"Brad, what can we do? Johnny's not just mean. He's gone *di-hil*!"

"Not that, Ruth!" He couldn't meet her eye, for she had read the doubt in his. It was a black doubt. "Don't worry. A good woman has straightened out many a haywire man."

She cried, "Brad!" There was protest in the word, and she came up against him, her body warm and vibrant. He had a wild impulse to wrap his arms around her. But he didn't; she wasn't his.

When she spoke again, he knew she was thinking something other than what she said: "Watch yourself around him, Brad. He is *di-hi*—a killer."

Haze was waiting at the barn door. "My crowbait's played out, Brad. Lemme have a horse, and I'll ride with you."

Brad said, "Not this time, Uncle Haze," and rode out. As he turned the shed corner, he saw them both watching from its entrance—a man who had once owned countless horses, yet now had to beg the use of one, and a girl he could hardly keep from loving.

He circled the town, unseen, and struck the rolling, hickory hills at a long trot. Every possible chance he let out the gelding, for he had a three-hour ride ahead. Thrusting mental problems aside, he concentrated on vigilance. But once, taking a breather by a clear-blue stream, he saw in his mind's eye the dust-caked belly of Johnny's roan as it pitched in Tahlequah's street.

He said aloud, "If he came up from Spa-town, and it had been storming down there, as Riley reported, how come that animal wasn't muddy? Was Johnny somewhere else, trying to cover up?"

An hour later, crossing a delta of dry sand, he found the fresh, deep-gouged tracks of a horse. Someone was riding fast ahead of him. He went

carefully now, cutting the sign twice more in the next hour.

And once he thought he was being followed. But the die had been cast, so on he rode, with a bristling animal alertness.

In midafternoon he reined up in piney woods on the edge of a clearing and studied the scene before him. There on a hillside was the *kanada*—wooden wigwam—of Bartle, the dead freighter. In a snake-fenced pasture milled several hundred horses. Ogle Beaver's blooded stuff! Yonder, under a brush arbor, were a score of men, their boisterous noise reaching him this far off.

He walked his gelding around to the hill, tied it in deep cover. Then, carrying his Henry, he threaded his way through vinery and dense cane almost to the cabin's wall. From there on, he went on all fours, sometimes on his belly, until he gained a spot fifty yards from the arbor.

The men were a motley lot, not an Indian among them. The mark of savages was upon them, though—the worst kind: white savages. Some still wore feathers in their hats. Moccasins and beaded Cherokee leggings mingled with coarse homespun. A number displayed dressed wounds, one with an arm in a sling, but all were in exuberant spirits. None seemed drunk, despite the numerous jugs.

Before the cabin was a huge pile of loot—saddles, grain, springhouse supplies, an organ, tribal heirlooms—which had been wagoned off from Beaver's. These raiders had missed little.

A brutish, ox-built youth, center of a small group playing cards, called across an interval to a white-haired,

red-faced ruffian: "Hey, Pappy, we-all's decided we need a ridin' song. You know, like them reg'lar hoss-sojers have. What's that un you said you-all usta sing back in Geo'gia?"

Pappy stood up, expanding his chest. Maybe it gave him volume, certainly not melody, as he boomed like a bullfrog:

*"All I want in this Creation
Is a purty wife and big plantation
Over yander in the Cherokee Nation."*

Brad lay rigid in the brush while icy fingers beat a tattoo along his spine. That song was out of the past; it was a link with the Dark Chapter of Cherokee history.

He'd heard it sung mournfully—not like this plunderer's rendition!—by old Ogle, who told how it was the rally-song of the greedy white hordes as they ringed in the Old Nation. Their Georgia lands had gold, minerals, so the Cherokee was ravaged, driven penniless from their homes. To that song, with smuttier lyrics, they had been exiled to this hostile, swampy clime.

But they had rehabilitated themselves. Not warlike, they had pulled prosperity up from the grassroots here. So now—Brad quivered—lightning was about to strike twice at them!

Two men emerged from the *kan-ada*, stood with a brief handshake. One wore a uniform, its cast appearing both bluish and gray to Brad, across the distance. He mounted a saddler at the cabin corner and rode away. The other, carrying a draw-string bag, clumped toward the singing group. It was Ott Drumbo.

As they ceased their yowling chor-

us, he said, "Go on, boys. I'll join yuh." Gesturing toward the bullfrog oldster: "Yonts an' me used to sing that thirty years ago. I was just a hoptoad alongside my pa."

Yonts said, "Ye're smarter than yer ol' man, Ott. He only got hisself a stocked plantation, but ye're after big b'ar."

"An empire!" said Drumbo, his throbbing tone evoking a hush. When he tossed the pouch into their midst, it clinked. "There's some spendin' money, boys. Hard specie. Th' Capt'-in bought every head—an' calvry mounts do cost high! He'll send a pick-up detail in th' mornin'."

Chattering, the men divided the coins. The ox-built kid began dribbling his share through parted fingers. Drumbo laughed.

"Yuh Arkansaw shoat, more mone-y'n yuh ever seen, ain't it? Well, all of yuh, keep ye heads, lay off th' *oki homi*—an' obey orders. Yuh'll be rich when we're done."

Yonts asked, "What's next?"

"Decoy our Copper Pin friends an' hit one of their places. Th' Ridge has a fair-to-middlin layout."

"Bigger'n Beaver's! Ye aim to wait till th' boys git back from Kansas, sellin' them caows? Ain't enough of us otherwise."

Drumbo said, "I thought I'd bring Johnny Beaver in on it. His hornets have buzzed up th' Territory; see if they can sting, too."

"I dunno!" said Yonts sharply. "Thet redskin bumfuzzles me. I don't like him! Take last night—I had me some duffle from one of th' big houses. Went up thet red-oak ridge to dump it in th' wagon. Thar sets Johnny on his beast, watchin' th'

doin's. Paws on both them pistols he packs.

"Holy Moses, I'd sworn I was a gorie cracker. Then some of th' Ridge bucks come clackin' behind me, an' Johnny, he scoots outa sight. I'm skeery facin' him; sure don't want my back to him!"

The shock of that revelation stunned Brad. With Yonts's words echoing in his brain, he searched them for a precise implication. Had he meant Johnny was a participant in that raid on his own family? No, Johnny wasn't that degenerate! But he recalled a dusty roan, a battle called by its Northern name, because Johnny's source was Union; and he recalled that Cain look on Johnny's face, above a leveled five-shooter.

It added up to a total that made Brad stir in raw anger, clenching his Henry. The crackle of disturbed brush jerked him to his senses, and he lay motionless. Yonts, however, was staring raptly at his spot.

Drumbo was saying, "Leave Johnny to me. Cain't nobody else pit these Cherokees at one another's throats better'n him. Git 'em fightin' amongst themselves, takin' sides in th' war, an' they're wide open! What we leave, th' Osages an' Pawnees an' Kimaniches can have. By th' way, Ab, yuh can unsaddle that fresh hawss. Changed m' mind. Think it's best to stay away from town tonight. Johnny's takin' over th' arsenal."

Impotent fury gripped Brad.

Drumbo asked cuttingly, "What's wrong, Yonts?"

Yonts said, "Thet brush shook. Somep'n glittered!"

Brad thought, *My gun barrel, or a nailhead on my hatband!*

Drumbo said, "Go see what it is."
"Uh-uh, Boss! I'll take a shot at it!"

The ruffian was throwing up his arm, lining down his cap-and-ball, when Brad thrashed to his feet in the brush. It was a long-shot gamble that he could reach his hidden horse, but he was desperation-goaded. Anything beat being helplessly sieved there.

For a moment, as his action startled them, he had an edge. He used it, snap-shooting thrice into their bunched ranks. Someone screamed, others began firing; all were yelling, Drumbo the loudest.

Brad ran humped-over, weaving, his boots slashing the briar mat, snagging in shrub roots. Once, with a clear space, he bounded headlong like a deer, despite the slugs whistling around him. Then he stumbled, fell, losing his Henry. As he slithered crabwise to retrieve it, he watched them coming on the trot, spread out like skirmishers.

The whir and zing of their bullets shredding the air about him, he knew he'd never make his horse. Squirming into a prone rest, he lined the rifle, aimed, squeezed trigger. The brass-bound rimfire jammed!

Levering frantically, he fought to retain self-control. When the unseen gun—behind him!—began spanging, he involuntarily sprawled flat. But it was pouring lead into Drumbo's gang, scattering them into a hasty, startled retreat. It came from a tangent, in a border of pines. He had an open lane to the hill; lunging erect, he took it.

He didn't even pause to fire any more. That other rifle was rattling out its loads so rhythmically it was music

in his ears. It ceased as he reached his spooky gelding.

Flinging himself into leather, he could hear the raucous din in the meadow, the random gunfire. The rifle answered once, a lone, defiant shot, and then he heard the flutter of hoofs, approaching him.

He went toward them. It was Ruth White Horse; she still brandished the rifle in her right hand. Emotion surged through Brad. He wondered why he wasn't surprised at her presence. Maybe it was because she was always beside him. She was a part of him—almost.

"Oh, you crazy fool!" she cried, relief husking her voice. Pushing up alongside him, she seemed, he thought, about to hug him.

He said, "Let's travel, Ruth," and reined out.

"Wait! Not that way. West; follow the base of Fork Bluffs."

"There are bogs that way."

"I know the bogs, Brad. Then it's a straight slot through the hills. Save miles and time."

They rode, cautiously at first, for Drumbo's raiders were ahorse now, venturing into the woods. At last, certain their deviation in direction had succeeded, they let out the animals.

Ruth's mount couldn't stand the pace. Brad slowed, finally had to halt for it to blow. She swung down, loosened cinch. He did likewise. Silence lay uncomfortable between them. He tried to shape his thoughts, dwell them on Ott Drumbo's setup. Instead, he was only conscious of her, so near, so vital.

She stood before him, waiting for him to raise his arms and take her.

He said, "Never fail me when I need you, do you?"

"Never," she whispered.

"Haze tell you where I was headed?"

"No, I simply followed you."

Words were just an empty stall; it had to happen. He had her in his embrace, her lips crushed against his. He held her head, fingers entwined in the silk of her loosened hair. And he couldn't release her, for in him was the yearning of a lifetime.

Then he did, pushing her away. He said, "No, Ruth!"

She cried, "Yes, Brad!" and came again into his embrace, her arms warm and soft, and unrelenting, around his neck.

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Chance

THERE was still sunlight in the hills, but here in the valley dusk was filtering over Tahlequah as they rode in. It was the most pleasant time of day, and ordinarily, on the eve of a Council, the most carefree. Families visiting, children scampering, pine knots glowing. The cheerful atmosphere of a people who couldn't be licked.

Not so this evening. The town was hushed, with few lamps lit. Nobody stirred in the street, but the blue shadows were peopled, silent and watchful. The thunderheads had piled up here; now it was as if everyone cowered from the impending storm of hate and passion.

Then Brad saw the lone man, standing with arms folded across his chest,

under the spreading bois-de-arc at the foot of Arsenal Hill. It was Ogle Beaver, wearing his *ani-gilahi* headdress, with its long feathered trailer.

Coming upstreet in slow, measured tread were Johnny and his gladiators. In the crook of his arm, each carried a rifle. Johnny's hat was shoved back on his heavy plew of black hair.

They made no effort to by-pass the old patriarch, and he made no move. But when they were within twenty paces, he spoke, his voice resonant in the electric quiet.

"That's far enough, my son."

Johnny took several defiant steps before halting. He said, "Don't interfere Father. We're doing what your council should've done a month ago. Arming our people. You head men sit on your rumps, a bunch of *uwatas*—worn-out old fogies—and yap like squaws. Chiefs, ha! Puppets on apron strings! Well, there are a few Cherokee *men* left!"

Ruth had her horse pressed close to Brad's; her fingers gripped his arm. Johnny's crowd seemed unaware of them, off to one side.

Ogle said, "Don't try my patience too much, boy. I have waited all afternoon for you to come to me as a respectful son should."

Johnny laughed, loud and harsh. "Come to you? I should go to Mama! She's the boss of the clan. She rules. It's her wigwam, her possessions. What she says, goes."

Ogle dropped his arms. A blow below the belt would have brought the same gesture, Brad thought.

Ogle said, reasoning in his tone: "Our way has been good to you, Johnny. A Christian home, no wants, no fears. A schooling better than the

average white man's. How other would you prefer it?"

Brad, taut, leaned forward, awaiting Johnny's belated answer. Johnny—suddenly, it seemed—had become indistinct in gloom. Shadows swirled around him, turbid and agitated, as his mind must be at that moment. Brad hoped he'd be honest, for it might provide a clue to his incendiary change.

Johnny was. "I want to be my own man, that's what! A free agent, strong, individual. That's the world today, old man. I'll take what I can—hold what I can. And it'll be mine—mine alone!"

There was a sickness of spirit in Brad as he walked his gelding into full view, facing Johnny. He asked, "Is that why you witnessed the raid on your father's place without lifting a finger? You figured it was no loss of yours?"

As Johnny stared at him, Brad could feel his quivering tension. At last Johnny snarled, "You're crazy!"

"No, Johnny. You weren't down at Spa-town. You sat on that red-oak *gatusi* above your homestead and watched—"

"What if I did!" Johnny lashed out, shaking in rage, his head swiveling as he probed the town's purple veil. Defiant or apprehensive, Brad couldn't determine. "No, I wasn't south. I'd been in Copper Pin country. Doing a little taking I just mentioned. But my companions were scattered last night. I was by myself, so what could I do? I'm not dying for nothing!"

Brad said metallically, "Disperse your band, Johnny. Or better still, ride from the Nation. I'm calling a caucus of the clans now. By high

moon every gun in the armory will be distributed to responsible men who can prevent further self-fighting." He paused, added, "Men of both factions."

Johnny's firebrands were shifting nervously, muttering to one another. They were on thin ice, unable to read the townsfolk who finally were moving into the street, quiet and solemn.

Reining aside, Brad flicked a glance over Ogle Beaver. Ogle sagged with dejection, yet the pulsing throb of his sudden voice arrested Brad, turning him back around. Ogle was saying:

"My son, my heart is heavy because I am bereft. Henceforth, where the Long Hair People are concerned, you are *hunya huska!* You, John Beaver, are dead!"

Brad gripped the saddle horn. The scene was a frieze; not even the bodark's branches stirred. For a Cherokee, this was a worse fate than hanging. Worse than being drummed out of an army. To be kicked out of the clan was equivalent to spiritual death.

Johnny's head seemed neck-drawn; his features were stricken. Slowly he pulled his stare from his parent, shuttled it over the near-by groups. When it came to rest on Brad, Johnny's lips moved. Brad thought they formed his name, mutely, but there was nothing he could do. Johnny had bought this!

Enervated, Brad wheeled his horse.

The next second it almost came unhinged beneath him as a blood-curdling sound rent the air. It was a prolonged coyotish turkey gobble! Controlling the animal, Brad brought it around on hind legs.

The Kiowa was known for his dog bark, the Comanche for his unulating yell. The Cherokee was a gobbler. On

the warpath, it meant death for anyone so gobbled at.

Villagers were darting to cover again. Johnny's bunch was milling. And Johnny, his Starr carbine lined dead-center on Brad, gobbled again!

Brad saw red. Since boyhood he had taken on Johnny's fights, had defended his youthful misdeeds. Now to have Johnny's hatred focus on him, like sun through a lens, sent a stark rage to boiling point within him.

He drove in heels, dropped along the gelding's barrel, and charged straight into Johnny. Johnny was knocked down, without firing, his carbine flung in the air. The gelding kept going, riderless, for Brad had piled onto Johnny.

They fought like dogs, seldom separated, hanging onto each other as they thrashed about in the red, billowing dust. When it was done, Johnny couldn't stand. Drunkenly, he half-sat against the bole of the tree, held there by Brad's claw fingers in his torn shirt front.

Between gasping, shallow breaths, Brad told him, "I should drive a blade through your throat—you skunk—but I just can't do it!"

He left Johnny there, bracing himself with palms outspread on the ground, and walked toward Ruth White Horse, who was dismounted and holding her rifle on Johnny's sullen, scared pack.

She made no comment, watching them fade away. Brad made none, watching the pathetic figure of Ogle Beaver wend toward a far group. And when they looked at each other, neither spoke.

Haze Walker shuffled over from the drift of townspeople. Cackling, he

squeezed Brad's arm. "You're a good boy, Brad! Yes, y'are. Say—did you find Ogle's horses where I told you?"

"Sure, sure," said Brad wearily, moving toward the Agency. "C'mon, we'll smoke."

Noting Ruth's absence, he turned, saw her standing with intent regard on Johnny, who was sitting erect. There was something alert, thoughtful in Johnny's manner, and Brad frowned, wondering if he had overheard Haze's question. Then Johnny leaned stiffly against the tree, and Brad dismissed the idea.

Ruth, joining Brad, wore a grave, troubled expression.

Johnny appeared at the Agency less than ten minutes later. He said, almost whiningly, "Please, Brad, let me talk with you."

It was not in Brad Ingalls to be vindictive, and he had never seen a more contrite, miserable specimen, the transition especially marked because he'd known the former version of swaggering self-confidence.

He said tonelessly, "Okay, Johnny, come in."

Ruth stood by a wall as Johnny entered. Her narrowed eyelids drew dark penciling across her soft, creamy skin. Johnny didn't seem to notice her, nor even Haze, when the latter nervously made an exit.

Johnny, fidgeting, gaze downcast, said, "I never meant it, Brad! Dunno why I went so crazy. Everybody branding me a renegade; you calling me a white rabble rouser. I just unconsciously wanted to show I was still Cherokee! It's truth, Brad. I didn't shoot you, did I? I couldn't!"

Brad thought, *Maybe I rattled you too much.* Then he softened. It was difficult to be steel-hard with this profligate youngster. They had fished, and hunted, and shared so many adventures together, growing up.

Johnny said, "Remember old times, Brad."

Brad said firmly, "I do, Johnny. There's no ill feeling; I'll forget it. Now you better go. The head men are due."

Johnny didn't budge. His eyes fastened onto Brad, and they were the brightest Brad had ever seen. "All I ask, Brad, is give me a chance!"

"Chance?"

"Yes. You know where Father's stock is! I heard Haze—"

"So what?"

Johnny said intensely, "Take my boys and recover it! We were dumb-wrong, Brad, but sincere. This would prove it. Don't you understand? They're all afraid they'll be cast out of their clans, like me! I—well, I led 'em into it. I'm begging this chance for them to get back in good graces. It's too late for me, but not them."

Brad studied the wall beyond Johnny's head. "I'll ask the elders to let them ride with us."

He heard Johnny's sigh of despair, saw his shoulders droop. Johnny said, "They wouldn't grant it. But thanks, Brad." He turned slowly away. At the door he paused, glancing back to say, "And I'm sorry I got so twisted up, old chum."

His forsaken, crestfallen mien did it. As he stepped onto the veranda, Brad called, "Johnny," and when he turned around: "I'll do it. Have them form up behind the stable."

Johnny's mouth went slack, his eyes

glittering in pleasure. Then he went sober, asking hesitantly, "Me, too?"

Brad bit his lip, nodded. "Sure."

Something of the other Johnny showed then, like a restored belief in himself. A-grin, he vanished into the gloom. Brad stood watching after him, until fingers dug into his forearm, pulling him around.

Ruth said vehemently, "No, Brad! You're making a mistake. You can't trust them! I know!"

Brad's features were haggard. "I don't know, Ruth. If I deny them the chance, it might be a mistake I'd also regret. By blabbing my big mouth there before Ogle, I'm responsible for Johnny being ostracized. No, I owe him this!"

He got his hat and a linsey jacket; thrust a handful of flat-nose Henry shells in its pocket. "You handle the armory deal. Your judgment's better than mine anyway."

She barred his way. "Is it? Then why not listen to me now!"

He didn't argue, knowing he would succumb, have her in his arms. He pushed around her, and as he went through the portal he heard her exclaim behind him:

"Damn you, Johnny Beaver, damn you!"

CHAPTER SIX

True Colors

HE WAS not foolhardy. His faith in Johnny had been cracked.

This night might cement it. If not—he avoided that aspect, in which event he knew he'd be in a trap!

There were sixteen in the party. He strung them out in pairs, spaced just

close enough for oral contact. He and Johnny brought up the rear, riding silent, heavy with thought, through the platinum moonlight.

This was his third horse in two days, and he was bone-tired, battered. It was hard to stay keyed-up, and once he called a gallop, the rush of wind in his face helping him stay awake. Saddles creaked, pines soughed, the cartridges clinked in his pocket.

Johnny was a glum, chin-on-chest figure beside him. *Hell*, Brad told himself, *he's been an unwitting tool of Drumbo's, not in league with him.*

Johnny spoke unexpectedly, harshly, "Know what she told me, Brad?"

Presuming he meant Ruth, Brad said, "No. What?"

"She said, 'Sure, I love you, Johnny, but you can't ask me to go to that wild Indian Territory and live in a tepee. I don't demand that you provide like Father. After all, he's a rich planter. I'll wait a reasonable period for you to establish a business here in Orleans. That should demonstrate my love.'"

He smote his saddle horn with a palm. "And me, a shirttail Indian, bound by apron strings to a ma-ma who'll live and die Cherokee!"

Choked up by a queer emotion, Brad stared at him, realizing he at last had the reason for Johnny's change. He muttered, "She wasn't worth it."

Johnny's head jerked up; he opened his mouth—and didn't speak. His expression went blank, but Brad felt his searching scrutiny.

Johnny laughed. "I bet you been figuring there was something between Ruth and me! Never was. She's the sister kind. Not for me."

Brad's exuberance of spirit was held in check as he wondered: Was that Louisiana girl still waiting? Did Johnny still love her? Therein lay the key to Johnny's character tonight. Yet now, as they rode toward a partnership redemption or a friend's betrayal, Brad couldn't question Johnny.

He wondered if he was afraid of Johnny's answer.

They were an hour into the hills when the moon hid itself behind nimbus clouds. The last hour they rode through a chill, fine-driven rain. Now they were all inside the snake-fenced clearing grouped together.

Ogle's horses were here, just as Brad had last seen them. Not a soul was in sight. Brad held his cocked Henry and studied the shrouded pine-fringe, the dark *kanada* on the slope. It wasn't like Ott Drumbo to leave this stock behind if he *had* decamped.

Johnny, puzzled, asked, "Reckon they heard us coming, were too yellow to fight?"

Brad grunted. Johnny went with him to the windowless round cabin. Standing aside, Brad poked its door inward with his rifle barrel. Then he stretched his neck, peering into the gloomy maw.

And a Paterson Colt's, barrel along temple, laid him out. . . .

He lay on the damp earthen floor when he came to. A tallow dip in a bottleneck flickered feeble light over the room, which contained a miscellany of saddle junk, a table, a rawhide cot. He wasn't bound, but his Dragon pistol was gone, and he saw his Henry on the cot.

Johnny stood above Drumbo, who was squatting in the middle of the

floor, building a pine blaze in a bed of dead ashes. Glistening wet, Drumbo shivered as he nursed the blaze. He was saying: "Sure he didn't talk with nobody in town?"

Outside, there was laughter, loud talk. Johnny's "penitent" followers were fraternizing with Drumbo's ruffians. Brad studied Johnny.

Johnny said, "I'm not sure. Don't think so. Only Ruth."

"Ain't worried about her. She saw me this afternoon, but she can't kick up a stink like Ingalls. Yuh and me can face her down." He spread his hands over the jumping flames. "Yuh done a good job. Johnny. Fast thinkin'."

"Had me wracking my brain for a while," Johnny admitted.

Brad stirred experimentally, lifted slightly. Sliding a hand along the earth, pushing up, his fingers touched metal. The rimfire .44 shells had fallen out of his jumper pocket. He clutched several tightly.

Johnny said, "I'm washed up in town, Drumbo. They read me out of the clan. So you've got a full-time field boss now." He noticed Brad's movements. "Oh-oh."

Rising, Drumbo clumped with soggy steps over to Brad, glared down at him. Brad hunkered; had got his feet under him. His gaze plainly contemplated his Henry yonder.

"How yuh feel, brain feller?" Drumbo sneered. "Kinda stupid? Yuh figgered I'd toss in my cards 'cause yuh snooped a bit, huh? Not me!"

Brad sprang, fast, past Ott. As he swerved to avoid the fire, Johnny grabbed him. For a second they rocked back and forth, then Johnny flung him to Ott. Ott uppercut him against

the wall. He stood there, with groggy attention on the blaze.

No brass cartridge was visible in its vicinity. He had dropped them accurately in the crackling flames.

He said, "You show where you've been, Drumbo. Out hiding in the brush. You didn't save your game. Johnny did. He's got more brains in his little toe than—"

"Hobble it, old chum." Johnny sauntered over, stood beside Drumbo. Brad wanted it that way. "Don't try to soft-soap me; you can't split me and Drumbo. We got this sewed up. There's four million bucks walking on the hoof in the Cherokee Nation. We're spending those bucks. After the war's over, these noble redskins with Southern tendencies likely will know a li'l martial law, or confiscation. My friend here may even be the Power in the land. I'll be in clover down in New Orleans, drinking bubbles with Annette."

His features writhed. "You were right, Brad. I'm white—in mind. And I'm not sorry about this. If you knife a person, turn the blade in him!"

The double explosion whirled Drumbo in shock. Johnny, quicker-witted, jumped backwards, watching Brad and yanking his pair of folding-trigger Colt's. In the same instant Brad was upon him, wrenching one of the freed guns from his grip. Thus each had a weapon, but Johnny never used his. Brad's shot plummeted him into the blaze, scattering it in a spray of coals.

Drumbo, lacing a slug in Brad's general direction, was frantically fleeing the room when Brad dropped him in the doorway.

After an initial babble, the outside

sounds were swallowed by a deathly quiet. He could hear the soft rain on the wooden wigwam. The raiders weren't sure what had happened in there. Presently they would nerve up and investigate, and he'd have a smoky go-round.

He waited on a bent knee, inside the door, his assorted weapons ready. He wasn't tense, and that seemed curious.

Then he knew that if he could hold out, help would arrive. This very moment it was on the way. Tonight Ruth White Horse had become his. He could feel her presence. . . .

It came before he had to fire a load. The whole Cherokee population, he thought, if the volume of racket was any indication.

He stood in midnight pall, and she was a blur before him, but he didn't need to see her face. He put an arm around her shoulder; hers slipped around his waist.

She said, "It took too long, passing out rifles. In the rain the bogs slowed us, too."

Even derelict Haze Walker was present. He was asking, "Where's Brad? Wanta find out if I can have Ott Drumbo's scalp. Know it's not right to take scalps, but I want one—his—this once!"

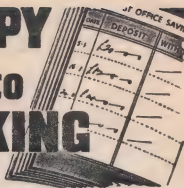
They walked away, and Brad said, "In the back of my mind I sensed it was a mistake with Johnny, but still there was a doubt."

She said, "Never was there a doubt in my mind. When there are two men, and you love one, you know how the other one feels about him."

In the rain, their lips met.

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B'iled Shirts and B'ar Steaks

By T. J. KERTTULA and D. L. McDONALD



Yuletide in Old Montana brought out the best—and the worst—in culinary strategy.

CHRISTMAS for the early-day Westerner is generally pictured as a pretty grim occasion, offering few opportunities for celebration save the dubious one of going on a crying jag. But there are on record accounts of a couple of Christmas celebrations within the bounds of the territory that is now Montana that would seem to disprove this lugubrious theory.

Take, for example, the community Christmas dinner in Bozeman Creek in 1874. That was likely the only time in the history of the Old West when every available male showed up at

table in a "b'iled" shirt and necktie. Needless to say, the feminine influence—in the person of two small, determined "she-males"—had begun to make itself felt in camp before that ever happened.

It all began one early December day when the only two married women of Bozeman Creek were indulging in a spot of tea and some wistful reminiscing about Christmas parties "back home."

The younger, Mrs. Mardis, confided that she wished she could see a real holiday party—"You know, with

the men dressed up in white shirts"—just once more before she died.

Her friend Mrs. Alexander thought about it. "Maybe it could be managed," she said, "even here in Bozeman Creek. It would take some doing, however. I haven't even seen my own man in anything more formal than 'overhauls' and miner's boots for the last six years. Have you?"

Mrs. Mardis shook her head. "Jim hasn't worn his good black broadcloth since our wedding," she admitted. "But maybe if the other men would—But how could we get *them* to do it? They're all bachelors and can dress as they please."

"Wait a minute," Mrs. Alexander exclaimed, "Bachelors—batching—that's it! You know how tired they get of their own cooking! Let's invite them all to a big Christmas dinner—with the proviso that they're not to come unless they're wearing white shirts and a necktie."

Mrs. Mardis giggled. "All right, let's! It's a cruel advantage to take, but wouldn't it be *fun* to really dress up for a party again? Poor men, they're not going to like it, though."

Nor did they. The invitations were duly issued, the "white shirt and necktie" proviso stressed. With one voice the bachelor population of Bozeman Creek—all the men in town, practically—swore they wouldn't do it. Not even for a home-cooked meal! The idea of getting duded up in a b'iled shirt just to eat dinner out here in the Territory was plumb ridiculous!

The ladies, both wonderful cooks, said nothing but went ahead with their preparations for the biggest Christmas dinner Bozeman Creek

had ever seen. From their kitchens wafted the almost-forgotten aroma of baking fruit cakes, the spicy sharpness of mincemeat, the cinnamony goodness of hot pumpkin pies. It was almost more than a hungry man could stand.

The rebellious bachelors took to walking past the Mardis and Alexander cabins a dozen times a day. They approached the ladies' husbands with pleas for a cessation of the ban on "overhauls" as proper dinner attire, but were met with lifted shoulders and the assurance that "the gals has got the bit in their mouths on this here fancy-dressed Christmas party, and there ain't no holdin' 'em."

Collectively, the males of Bozeman Creek sniffed, licked their lips, and appointed a delegation to offer the ladies a compromise.

They would, they swore, gladly don b'iled shirts and even neckties—if they had any—just to please Mrs. Mardis and Mrs. Alexander. But, unfortunately, in the rush of packing their duds for the gold fields they had neglected to include these effete articles of attire. They jest couldn't wear b'iled shirts. They didn't have none.

They sat back, snickering, and waited for the ladies to relent. These, however, had lived too long in a practically all-male world to be taken in by this maneuver.

"That's too bad," Mrs. Mardis told them. "Jim has a good white shirt and so has Mr. Alexander. This is going to be a dress-up party, even if there's only the four of us present. Which will be a shameful waste of food, for I've baked six of each kind of pie."

It was Mrs. Alexander who dealt the bachelors of Bozeman Creek the final blow, however. Although it was still two days to Christmas, she set a big pan of bread dressing, liberally laced with onions and sage, to baking in her oven. And then, despite the sub-zero Montana weather, she opened her windows wider.

What male who ate his own indifferently cooked for three hundred and sixty-five days a year could resist that aroma? Bozeman's bachelors didn't even try. With one accord they agreed they'd come to dinner in b'iled shirts if they had to rob Boot Hill to get them. As matters turned out, for a time it seemed that was what they would have to do.

A hasty round of Bozeman Creek's few emporiums proved that they didn't stock b'iled shirts. Why should they, when no frontiersman would even be seen dead in them? The local undertaker admitted that he'd once had a gross of the things, but hadn't been able to palm them off even on *his* customers. Bozeman Creek had its share of funerals, but the pards of the dear departed were always unwilling to saddle even a corpse with anything so uncomfortable.

What *had* happened to the starched-bosomed shirts, then? Hmmm—let's see—oh, yes, he'd got rid—he'd sold them to Charlie, the Chinaman.

"Chink" Charlie, a tiny, trusting Oriental, operated a small shop out on the edge of the diggin's, and was generally supposed to stock every kind of useless merchandise ever invented by man.

"Indleed yes," he agreed, bowing, "Charlie got bloiled shirtee, velly fine,

for fluneral. You all wantee fine fluneral, mebbe?"

Abashed, the boys explained that their need was more immediate. Charlie was not impressed. Somehow, he'd gotten it into his Oriental mind that "bloiled" shirts were for the dead, and he wasn't going to compromise his belief, even for a sale. It took a lot of argument on the part of the bachelors of Bozeman Creek—and the payment of twice each garment's weight in bankable dust—to outfit themselves in b'iled shirts for the ladies' Christmas party.

Considering the discomfort of that starched-fronted bit of masculine apparel and their own long freedom from its imprisoning confines, it was quite a penalty to pay for a home-cooked meal! The boys were plumb desperate.

A decade earlier, women were mighty scarce in Montana Territory, and there was no one to make the men get all fixed up for that earlier Christmas party in Virginia City in 1863. It was a strictly stag affair.

That winter, William Thompson was batching in a little hillside dug-out on his claim with three other men—Griffith, Nemby, and Clanton. Reminiscing one night about Christmas celebrations they had known "back in the States," they wound up by deciding to cook, for old time's sake, the most elaborate Christmas dinner the scanty supplies available in Virginia City would permit.

A few days before Christmas a friend had given them a quarter of cinnamon bear, and they decided that "b'ar" steaks would be the main

course of the meal. Griffith volunteered to cook it, assuring the rest that he was a past master at making "a b'ar taste like it ain't a b'ar." Since this was an achievement to strive for in cooking bear meat, the boys promptly voted him in charge of that part of the dinner.

Thompson was delegated to provide fruit and vegetables for the occasion, with the stipulation that it could be "anything but beans." His proved a difficult assignment, for a round of Virginia City's few food emporiums convinced him that this humble legume was the town's sole representative of the fruit and vegetable kingdoms.

He did, however, unearth at the rear of one shop several pounds of onions that had been thrown out with the trash earlier in the fall. They were frozen solid, but since they were all he could find he paid the storekeeper three dollars for them and carted them out to the cabin.

Nemby, meanwhile, had decided to bake a cake. The others were loudly skeptical, but he assured them that, as an only child, he'd helped his ma bake cakes many a time back in Illinois.

"There ain't nothin' to it," he argued. "All you gotta do is mix up some flour an' eggs an' sugar—"

"We got flour an' sugar," Clanton agreed. "But them there case eggs; ain't they a mite powerful fer a cake?"

"I'll jest put in a couple extry handfuls of sugar. That'll sweeten it up so's you won't hardly notice the eggs. 'Course I'll need some short-enin'—"

"Where you figger to git it?"

"That ain't worryin' me. If there ain't none down to the store, I'll

render me out a little b'ar grease; that b'ar was a mighty fat critter."

The boys continued to be dubious, but Nemby finally convinced them that if the rest of the meal turned out to match his cake it was going to be a repast fit for Jeff Davis hisself. Their last objection—that their battered old cook-stove had no oven—he overrode by persuading the proprietor of Virginia City's lone eatin'-house to let him borrow the loan of his oven for a few hours on Christmas morning.

Clanton meanwhile had entered an objection that apparently the whole meal was planned without any help from him. What should he contribute? The others, mindful of his peculiar talents, promptly put him in charge of the liquid refreshments, with the wistful request that he "look around an' see if he couldn't mebber find some see-gars, too." Tobacco was in notably short supply in Virginia City just then.

Christmas morning dawned clear and cold, and almost before daylight the four men were up and busy with their preparations for the big day. Griffith went to work with a hacksaw and butcher knife, hacking off b'ar steaks, and Thompson went out in the wood-shed and dragged in the sack of frozen onions. They built up a good hot fire in the cookstove, and each man put his specialty on to cook.

Nemby scrubbed out an old gold pan, gathered up his cake ingredients and a tomato can of melted b'ar grease, and cut across town to use the borrowed oven. Clanton set out on a round of the saloons to hunt for his own specialty.

The cold Montana dusk was falling before everything was in readiness. Each man dished up his own specialty and, as befitted the occasion, served good big portions. Griffith loaded the tin plates with huge chunks of redolent bear meat, and beside it Thompson dumped a pile of the slimy grayish mass to which long hours of boiling had reduced his frozen onions.

On top of the whole, Nemby lowered a quarter of a flattish circle that was, obviously, his cake. With a flourish, Clanton filled their tin cups to the brim with the only liquor the town afforded; a bottle of particularly vile local bar whisky. Dinner was served!

With one accord, the four drew up their benches, fisted their knives, and set to work. By common consent they avoided the evil-smelling mass of frosted onions and turned their attention to the b'ar steaks. Unfortunately, they tasted like b'ar. All-day cooking had impaired neither their lusty bruin flavor nor the firmness of their texture. The boys chewed for a while and then gave up. They could as easily have masticated well-tanned elk hide.

As for Nemby's cake, it was—in Thompson's own words—"unapproachable." Well-aged eggs and b'ar grease had not enhanced its flavor and "it had mebbe fell a little."

Someone jumped up, threw open the door, and four tin plates loaded with frozen onions, b'ar steaks, and Nemby's cake sailed out into the darkness. A couple of hours later the four sat down to a good filling familiar meal of sourdough bannack, "sowbelly," and beans—and what finer Christmas dinner could anyone want? they asked each other. The whisky was probably the worst bar whisky any of them had ever tasted, but after the first cupful or two, the rest went down easier. There was even a see-gar apiece to finish off with.

As Thompson said, "We sure was lucky to have such a fine Christmas in a frontier town like what this is."

He didn't know how lucky they had been! There were no "shemales" in all the Territory in 1863 to make them get all duded up in a stiff collar, a necktie, and the torture of a b'iled stiff-bosomed shirt for Christmas!





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